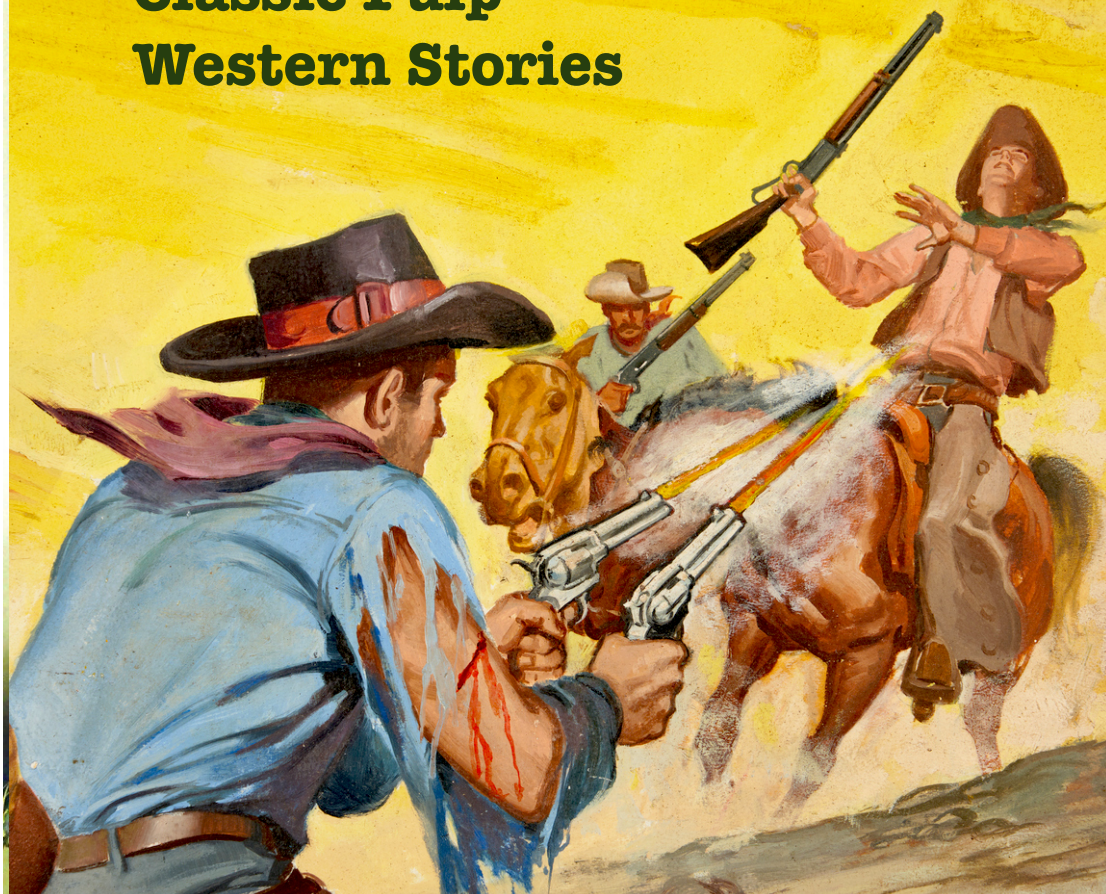


**Classic Pulp
Western Stories**



THE WESTERN STORIES OF

**HASCAL
GILES**

The Western Stories
of

HASCAL GILES

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When the Weeping Woman Mine yields the ore of death, the call goes out for the swift gun-and-flint help of the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk



by
**HASCAL
GILES**

Mad Man of Moonstone

A WAYNE MORGAN NOVEL

CHAPTER I

Restless Cattle

THE Diamond Cross roundup camp was silent while the storm built up in the hills. Thunder rumbled and roared among the craggy granite ridges in the distance. Intermittent flashes of light-

ning struck fantastic reflections from the cores of various minerals in the rocks. Still far away, the storm seemed to be rolling on clanging wheels toward the camp, the sound of its fury striking first in the great irregular crater of Moonstone Valley and then slipping through the mouth of the little dog-leg hollow that

Wayne Morgan Sides Old Cap Maxwell of the

contained the Diamond Cross Ranch herd.

The cowboys around the campfire sat with tense backs and solemn faces, staring morosely into the flickering flames. Fear and foreboding seemed to hover over their thoughts.

Old Cap Maxwell, the big rawboned owner of the Diamond Cross Ranch, was aware of their silence and preoccupation, and he tried to hide the uneasiness in his own weathered face when the men lifted an occasional glance toward him. He knew it was not the gathering storm that had killed the usual round of talk at tonight's campfire. It was something far more deadly, and it worried him.

After his last crew had quit, a month had been required to collect a new string of riders, and Maxwell had taken every precaution to keep them until he could gather enough cattle to pay the stockholders who had invested money in the Weeping Woman Mine which he had helped to finance. He had personally promised each investor that he would not lose by trusting him. The men had done that, and the mine had failed.

Even after four years, those men were still looking to Cap Maxwell to keep his word. Proud of this trust, the old rancher had made regular payments to the stockholders each year. But this year he would fail unless the herd was marketed. Before, he had had help, but the duty was his alone now. Grady Sloan and Thad Tate, the two men who had shared his burden, were dead. They had died less than two miles from the hollow in which Maxwell was camped. Sloan and Tate had been partners in the mining venture, and both were as honest and truthful as Cap Maxwell. Their killer still ran free.

It was this that put the tension in Maxwell's riders tonight. Most of the men were new to this range, picked up one at a time by Whit Berry, the Diamond Cross foreman, as they drifted into the little cowtown of Cactus at the lower end of the valley. Neither Maxwell nor Berry had told the cowboys of the circumstances which had caused other riders to draw their time at the Diamond Cross and ride away, but every man had eventually

learned the story from other sources. Now they believed that the same killer who had waylaid two of Cap Maxwell's partners would eventually get Maxwell, too. It looked like part of a plan, and riding for a man who was marked for death was enough to make them uneasy.

"What's that?"

SKINNY, sandy-haired Jack Long leaped suddenly to his feet as some sound came to his ear through the stillness left by a dying thunderclap. He stood there a moment peering anxiously into the inky gloom which storm clouds had brought to Moonstone Valley.

Gray-haired Cap Maxwell stilled his first chill of surprise, and raised mild blue eyes toward the dark bulk two hundred yards below. Over the gentle waving of dark dried sage and crisp clumps of mesquite, he could see the outline of the herd. The cattle were bedded east of Nugget Creek, the faithful little stream that fed lush grass and made the hollow green in spots where Nature had swept the floor clean of rocks.

Hobe Venter, one of the night riders, moved across Maxwell's line of vision. The rancher recognized the silhouette of Venter's thick, burly frame and the slouching way in which he sat his saddle. Stacy Lipps, the other man on duty, was not in sight. By the wavering flare of a lightning flash he saw Venter's arm moving in a ragged circle above his head.

"Sit down, Long." Cap Maxwell forced his voice to be strong and calm as he spoke to the skinny cowboy who still stared into the darkness. "What yuh heard was the whistle of Hobe Venter's lariat. The cattle must be restless, for I see Venter's swingin' his rope over 'em to keep 'em bunched."

"Bad sign," Whit Berry said tonelessly from Maxwell's right. The Diamond Cross foreman stood up and raised his steel gray eyes toward the rough ridge which boxed in the hollow from the north. Lightning was dancing on the horizon, jumping from peak to peak like impish devils.

"What do yuh mean, Whit?" Maxwell asked.

Diamond Cross in a Range War for Survival

The tall foreman pulled his hands close to the two pearl-handled Colts that rode low on his lean thighs, and nodded in the direction of the herd which was bedded between the camp and the mouth of the hollow.

"The cows were spooked before the thunder started, Cap. When a herd starts millin' for no reason a-tall, there's trouble

"Where you goin', Whit?" Maxwell asked quietly as the foreman turned and walked away from the fire. Tenseness was beginning to eat at the rancher's nerves now, and he wanted Whit Berry where he could reach him. If trouble should come, the young foreman was the only man Maxwell could count on for help. The other riders were new and untried, but



WAYNE MORGAN

on the air. We don't have to hold our tongues no more; the boys here all know that out of the four men who organized the Nugget Creek Minin' Company, there ain't but two left. We're less than two miles from the Weepin' Woman Mine, Cap, where Grady Sloan and Thad Tate got salivated. Nobody's goin' to waste time killin' Shan Loring, so that leaves mostly just you that the killer wants."

Cap Maxwell sighed wearily as the thoughts that had been in his own mind were voiced aloud by Whit Berry. He tried to keep his eyes away from the strained faces of the riders across the fire from him.

Whit Berry would stand and fight. In addition to his loyalty, the young foreman had reason to hate the man who had killed Maxwell's partners as much as the rancher did.

Berry turned and looked back at the rancher. His clean-cut brown face was tired and haggard, and weariness showed in the depths of his gray eyes.

"Me, I don't like nervous cattle," he answered slowly. "I'm goin' down to the herd and check with Venter and Stacy Lipps. If things look right, I'll probably ride through the hollow and take a pasear around this end of Moonstone Valley. There's a lot of places I ain't been yet; so

many canyons and caves and arroyos down there that I'll probably never get around to all of 'em."

Cap Maxwell shook his head sadly as he met the cowboy's steady eyes. "You was in the saddle all night last night and all day to today, Whit. You're killin' yourself. Why don't you give it up?"

For a moment, Whit Berry did not reply, and then he said: "You was married once, Cap, and I know yuh loved yore wife. Would you give up?"

Maxwell shook his head slowly. "No, Whit. But you need rest."

IN THE dense darkness that settled again on the heels of each lightning flash, Whit Berry was invisible the moment he stepped away from the fire and toward his hobbled horse a short distance beyond. But Cap Maxwell stared at the spot where Berry disappeared, his sympathy for the youngster taking his mind from his own worries.

The search on which Whit Berry was again about to start had been a long and heart-breaking one. It had started three months ago, the day after Grady Sloan had been killed. Sloan's daughter, Velma, was to have been married the next day. Whit Berry was to be the bridegroom. But the wedding had never been performed because Velma Sloan disappeared on the same day her father died.

Cap Maxwell's mind traveled back to the last time he had seen her. She had been a tragic figure riding into Cactus on her grulla cowpony with the limp body of her father across the saddle in front of her. Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell had been in town to buy supplies and they had gone to the undertaker's office with her to make arrangements for Grady Sloan's burial.

Afterward, Whit Berry had wanted to accompany the girl home when she rode out toward the little G Bar S Ranch in the foothills, but Cap Maxwell had held him back. Velma had been very brave throughout the ordeal, and Maxwell had known the emotion he saw veiled in her hazel eyes was being held in leash until she was alone.

For that reason he had advised Whit to stay behind, but he had always regretted his interference. Velma Sloan had not been seen again, and her fate was still a

mystery. Since then Whit Berry's mind had known no rest. The young foreman had driven himself almost to the point of exhaustion in a fruitless search for a clue to her disappearance.

A sudden ear-splitting crash of thunder jerked Maxwell's thoughts back to the present, and he swung a swift glance toward the cattle to see if they were still in place. As his eyes made the turn, the old rancher leaped to his feet with cold sweat growing immediately on his leathery brow. For the space of a few seconds he had forgotten that his own life was hounded by an ever-present menace, and in that brief interval that long-expected blow against the Diamond Cross had come! It came so swiftly, and in such an unexpected way, that Maxwell's tongue could not find words at first.

Finally, he yelled: "Whit, look! Look over there!"

A chorus of yells drowned the rancher's voice, for all of the men saw the light at once. One moment the narrow pocket of the granite-rimmed valley in which the herd was camped was as black as pitch. The next instant, a brilliant red flare broke through the darkness on Cap Maxwell's left, appearing first against the blue-white rocks of the steep ridge behind them.

Red tongues of flame leaped skyward like bloody lances, competing with the flashing lightning in their brilliance. The scarlet streak moved on, racing swiftly toward the mouth of the hollow, firing brush and sage in a wavering red line as it flew past the herd.

Almost at the same instant a similar flare appeared to the right, flitting like a grounded comet through the tender grass and brush which grew thicker there because of the creek. While the startled cowboys gaped in awe, two gleaming streaks of fire sprang to life, stretching from the rocks behind the camp to the mouth of the hollow. A wall of flame now crackled hungrily on each side of the camp and the herd. Toward the south, the fire lines curved like prongs and pressed rapidly together, blocking any escape from the hollow into Moonstone Valley.

"We're trapped!" a cowboy yelled in horror. "Fire on both sides of us. It'll get us all—the cattle, too!"



Wayne Morgan staggered and tried to catch his balance as Hobe Venter reached for his throat (CHAP. IX)

CHAPTER II

Robin Hood Rider

FOR a full minute after he sounded the alarm, Cap Maxwell was too dumfounded to move. He threw a bony forearm above his squinted eyes as it to shut the awesome scene from his vision. At first the fire had seemed to come from nowhere, a devastating force of the supernatural that had suddenly transferred Hell to this jutting finger of Moonstone Valley.

Strangely, the confusion of the others snapped Cap Maxwell to his senses. He decided there was nothing uncanny about the brush fire that had suddenly doomed his men and his cattle. In the concealing shadows of the northern ridge, two unknown horsemen had waited and watched for the right moment. They had soaked a heavy torch with some inflammable substance, fastened it to their saddles with a draw chain, and then dragged it through the summer-parched brush of Moonstone Valley. By now the horsemen had discarded their torches, and had fled through the defile to the interminable maze of the main part of the valley.

Far below, now lighted grotesquely by fire-thrown shadows at one moment and cavorting lightning the next, the Diamond Cross herd bellowed in fright. Oddly, there was no sound from the two night riders; but around Cap Maxwell other voices chorused in bewilderment and fear.

The rancher had to shout twice to make himself heard above the increasing roar of thunder.

"Get yore horses, men," he yelled hoarsely. "This is a straight lane from the bed grounds, and them cattle will stam-pede before long. They won't run to the fire, so they'll come this way. Yuh don't want to be afoot when that happens!"

As his voice took hold of them, the men made a dive toward their hobbled mounts. But they did not have to go the full distance. Maxwell had thought it odd that Whit Berry had not answered his call, and now he saw the reason. Whit Berry came out of the darkness with his hands full of dangling reins. At the first announcement of the brush fire, the tall

foreman had kept his head and worked swiftly. He had the horses ready, saddles draped loosely across their backs.

"Tighten the cinches and check yore bridles," he said sternly as some of the noise subsided. "It's a hurry-up job."

He shifted his eyes to the gaunt face of Cap Maxwell. "What do yuh say, Cap? It looks like every man for himself."

Maxwell grabbed his own horse and worked skillfully on the harness. "I got more cattle down there than I've had in one spot in two years. I need 'em, Whit. Milo Trapp is pressin' me for more money on his gold mine stock, and besides I've got my own debts. I've let 'em go while I tried to pay back what Grady, Thad and me promised we would."

"Forget about that miserly Milo Trapp and think of yore life," Whit Berry snapped. "He's the only one that ever gripes about what he lost, anyway. It ain't fair, Cap. Why don't somebody jump on Shan Loring? He's the gent that said there was a bold vein there to start with."

The rancher whirled his horse around and frowned at the younger man. "Quit talkin' nonsense, Whit. Shan Loring is so loco he thinks he's paid off more than I have. Think of them cows. With as many men as we got, we can push 'em through the thinnest line of the fire to the land that's already burned. Enough runnin' hoofs will smother out a path for us to follow and—"

A flurry of motion drowned out the rancher's voice. The four cowboys had grown tired of waiting for orders. They were gone like a whirlwind, dashing madly toward the rocky ridge before the two roaring fires united and closed the last lane of escape.

"It's hopeless, Cap," Whit Berry said hurriedly. "There go yore men!"

Moving with surprising speed, Maxwell dragged his old Peacemaker Colt from the scarred holster on his hip and started to fire a warning shot over the fleeting riders. Then he lowered the gun and shook his head in resignation.

"They're gone, all right. My reputation and my ranch is probably gone with 'em. But we'll save our own skins, Whit. Ride for the ridge and pray that them cattle don't start movin' until we get a head start. We'll have to pick our trail, and they won't take time!"

GANGLING Whit Berry nodded grimly, and started to roll his spurs along his pony's flanks. Then abruptly he slacked off on the reins, looked meaningfully across at the gaunt, gray-haired man beside him. The ridge was cut off from view now by a shimmering red blanket that hung before it. A crooked line of dead cedars had given the fire new vigor and the two sections had come together.

While they sat stunned by the realization that they were completely surrounded by the inferno, the unmistakable rumble of hoofs was clear above the crackle of the growing fire and the murmuring thunder of the heavens. The cattle were already moving! There was scorching fire five hundred yards ahead of them, and half a thousand head of charging, maddened, sharp-horned cattle running in blind terror behind them!

"Whoever's after the bosses of the Nugget Creek Minin' Company won't have nobody to worry about after this, I reckon," Cap Maxwell said tightly. "Look like we're gon—"

Cap Maxwell broke off and blinked in amazement at the raging fire ahead of him. At first he thought hysteria had confused his senses and that his eyes were deceiving him. The thought of supernatural things almost found its way into his mind again, for silhouetted against that menacing red wall, were the two strangest horsemen he had ever seen!

In an instant he realized that what he saw was true, for the nearness of the figures was proof that they had had time to enter the hollow before the fire blocked the ridge from sight. A giant black stallion caught his attention first—a magnificent high-stepping horse with an ebony hide that glistened like molten metal in the firelight. But, as strange as the great stallion appeared at that moment, the rider was even more startling to gaze upon.

Leaning low on the stallion's back was a tall, black-clad figure whose ease in the rocking saddle made him seem a part of his speeding mount. Both horse and rider moved with such grace that they appeared to sail along the earth as if driven by a powerful wind. The flowing cape which was slung from the black-clad horseman's shoulders made the illusion even more deceiving.

As the rider came closer, Cap Maxwell's wondering eyes took in the full picture and he was grateful that it was not an apparition. A black mask shielded the eyes and upper part of the man's hard, brown face and a black sombrero was pulled low on his forehead. The flames behind him struck jagged reflections from the two worn Colts that were snugged low on the man's lithe thighs.

"Saints alive!" Maxwell cried excitedly. "It—it's the Masked Rider, Whit!" He did not know why the fear in his body surrendered to sudden elation, but the many tales that he had heard of this daring, mysterious benefactor of troubled men gave him new hope for deliverance.

Whit Berry whirled around, his face flushed with joy as he studied the two horsemen. A few paces behind the Masked Rider was a stocky, copper-skinned Indian. He was of the Yaqui tribe, a muscular, graceful man who clung to the back of his sturdy gray pony with the skill and tenacity of his savage forefathers.

Aside from the single eagle feather that was held close to his broad forehead by the scarlet bandeau which bound his long raven-black hair, there was little of the savage in this man. He was dressed in white drill pants and a blue cavalry shirt. A scarlet sash served as a belt around his tapering waist, not quite concealing the hilt of a bone-handled hunting knife.

"The Masked Rider and his Indian pard Blue Hawk!" the foreman breathed. "I've heard of 'em, but never believed they was real people till now!"

The many tales of daring and gunspeed that were whispered in brawling trail towns and around lonely campfires made the reality of the Masked Rider difficult to comprehend, indeed. He had become a legend in every hamlet of the far-flung West, his name striking fear into the hearts of the lawless and reviving good memories for those unfortunate and persecuted people whom he had helped.

THOUGH he was the champion of the common man, a relentless foe of outlawery and oppression, the Masked Rider was not always mentioned in words of praise. Through the machinations of wily outlaws and dishonest lawmen, he was listed among the ranks of "wanted" men. A fabulous bounty awaited the man who

captured or killed the famed Robin Hood of the danger trails. Because of this, the black domino mask was never removed in the presence of anyone except the trusted Yaqui. Only Blue Hawk knew that the daring black-clad horseman often removed his robe and mask and walked abroad in the guise of a wandering soft-spoken cowboy who was known as Wayne Morgan.

Before Cap Maxwell could speak again, the great black stallion had skidded to a halt a few feet in front of the rancher and his foreman. Blue Hawk, the Yaqui Indian, reined in beside the stallion, his coppery hands closing immediately on the stock of the Winchester rifle in his saddle boot. He sat stoically that way while the Masked Rider quieted the stallion, his black eyes alert as he waited to learn if these men would try to collect the reward on the black-clad man's head.

Keen blue eyes sparkled through the slits in the satin mask as the Robin Hood outlaw faced Cap Maxwell and Whit Berry. He glanced once in the direction of the herd, saw the white faces of terrified steers swinging into view.

"What are we waitin' for?" he asked, his voice deep and vibrant. "Let's stop them cattle!"

Cap Maxwell was quickly aware of the power in that husky voice, and he knew that for a time he was no longer in command of his own outfit. The Masked Rider had assumed immediate authority, but the rancher was still dubious of the outcome.

Maxwell's eyes made a rapid sweep of the land, and horror again laid its grip on him. Flames were racing in madly from the east; below him the mass of horned heads had become a white blob in the night, and behind them were the crushing, maddened bodies of stampeding cattle!

"We can't do that!" Maxwell yelled above the clattering din. "You can't chase cows into fire, and they're already on us!"

With an impatient gesture, the Masked Rider flung the flowing black cape away from his arms. In the same movement, his gloved hands blurred with speed, the two black Colts appeared miraculously in his clutching fists, strong thumbs pulling the hammers back.

"Keep yore head, man!" the robed horseman snapped. "You ain't even re-

membered that there's a creek a little to the West, and that one line of the fire is on the far bank. The men that set this inferno forgot that, too, and the fire can't burn through that water over there. We'll drive the cattle into the creek, string 'em out up and down the length of it. They'll stay there!"

Whit Berry spoke for the first time, his voice thin with controlled fear. "I'd as soon try to get through there by myself. They're almost here! How we goin' to stop them."

"Hot lead will stop anything on foot," the Masked Rider cut in sharply, explaining the drawn Colts. "You'll never outrun 'em. Which would you rather do, lose thirty-four steers or the whole herd? Kill 'em as they come at you! That's better than lettin' them burn to death and it's your life against a cow. Pile up a few here, and the others may turn!"

There was no time left for argument. A bawling, red-eyed steer burst into the ring of light cast by the smouldering fire. It was running hard, far ahead of the others, and appeared with such abruptness that it caught the old rancher off-guard as it headed straight for Maxwell's horse. The Masked Rider's worn six-gun spat lead and flame. The terrified animal took one more step, then dropped to a painless death within five feet of Cap Maxwell's mount.

The shot was enough to convince Cap Maxwell and Whit Berry of the Masked Rider's wisdom and skill. They had camped within sight of Nugget Creek and had forgotten its safety in the excitement and confusion of the fire. But the famed Robin Hood outlaw was accustomed to respecting Nature as his silent partner in critical moments, and he had ridden to their rescue with the plan already in mind.

HASTILY the gaunt rancher and the tall foreman rode up to flank the robed horseman now, their guns drawn as they faced the thundering herd. The earth beneath them trembled and shook as the running cattle bore down on them. As if vexed by the competition below, the heavens above suddenly growled anew and the rain which had been threatening for hours broke loose. It came just as the main body of cattle burst into view, and

the sizzle of drying water could be heard faintly as it fell into the burning valley.

"Here they come!" Whit Berry cried hoarsely, but there was no answer to his announcement. Only the roar of guns and the scream of lead as each man fired into the raging mass of live bodies.

Every man stayed in the saddle, their guns rattling in spasmodic explosions. The Masked Rider took his stance a few feet in front of the others, Maxwell and Berry

Only one of the beasts got through. It came leaping and jumping over the pile of dead bodies, seeing nothing, feeling nothing but the desire to run as it sailed through the air toward the Masked Rider's horse. Cap Maxwell screamed a warning and snapped off a shot, missing. Blue Hawk swung around with his rifle, his usually impassive face showing alarm as he realized there was not time for a shot. None of them could have saved the Robin



BLUE HAWK

on either side of him and Blue Hawk farther away on his left. Midnight, the Robin Hood rider's battle-wise stallion, stood gallantly still, not moving a muscle that would spoil his master's aim. Both black Colts were gripped in the Masked Rider's hands, hammering out a duet of death as the steers kept coming.

There were ten or fifteen animals in that first crushing wave. The Masked Rider picked off the first four with as many fast-thrown shots, watching them fall and flounder in the growing mud, tripping up the others. The guns of Maxwell and Berry were a steady rattle beside him, and Blue Hawk levered and fired his rifle with studied care, seldom missing a shot.

Hood outlaw from a deadly spill then, and he could not drop his guns to jerk the reins quick enough. But Midnight needed no command. The gleaming black horse suddenly reared high in the air, swung around in mid-air while the masked man held on with his knees. The steer zoomed under the uplifted hoofs, running on into the rocks and bellowing with fear.

"Reload!" the masked man shouted as they had a brief respite from the stampede. He snicked open the chambers of his own guns, ramming in new shells as a louder murmur drifted through the driving rain. "Here comes the rest of them!"

With full guns the men waited. The fire on the east was less than fifty yards away, and the damp heat of it was notice-

able despite the rain. In front of the camp was a small barricade of dead steers, but the Masked Rider was aware that the real test had not yet been made. It was coming now—a rumbling, roaring, bawling onslaught from below!

The remainder of the herd swept in sight like a dark, crawling flood that had the power to run uphill. Lead steers dashed ahead, and the masked man's Colts again opened the attack. Two of the animals went down, but the main throng was close behind them, shoving on with the brute strength that would crush men and horses and camp equipment beneath its weight. There was no time for talk or thought. There was desperation behind each burning slug, a silent prayer for every animal that toppled and fell.

Guns rattled like tom-toms as a new confusion grew in the herd. The barricade of death in front of the camp grew higher as more steers answered the life-saving lead. As the new leaders began to hesitate doubtfully, the masked rider took time to glance to his left. The fire was pressing in on that side, and he could feel the heat of it through his rain-soaked clothes. But the flames were also a part of his plans, and he did not dread them. It would help force the cattle westward toward the creek, and he knew the time had arrived for the big gamble.

"It's now or never," he shouted above the ear-splitting din of fire and cattle and rain. "Into 'em with swingin' ropes and plenty of yellin'!"

HE ALLOWED no time for hesitation. The robed horseman sent Midnight charging forward, and Blue Hawk urged the gray in behind him. The two mysterious riders led the way, turning, twisting, yelling. Holstering his powder-warmed guns, the robed horseman snatched the rope from his saddlehorn, cutting a determined swath in front of him as he lashed at the puzzled beasts.

A steer bellowed and gave ground, forcing another to turn aside. Blue Hawk swung in behind the two beasts, driving them westward with blood-curdling war whoops. Expert cattlemen that they were, Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell recognized the turn and strengthened it. They swung apart, driving steers into a wedge-shaped formation that followed the Yaqui's move.

As the leaders spied new freedom ahead they broke into a run. Slowly, the great tide of live bodies buckled and broke at the camp grounds, and turned mechanically toward the cooling waters of Nugget Creek. Cap Maxwell's triumphant yell rose above the noise of sucking hoofs. He dropped back to ride with the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk behind the herd, and Whit Berry rode out of the confusion to join them.

All they had to do now was stretch their mounts into a long lope, for the cattle needed no encouragement. The herd reached the scrawny willows and cottonwoods along Nugget Creek and rode the bushes down in its haste to touch water. As more cattle crowded in, they began to move up and down the length of the stream, all of them refusing to travel into the fire which was burning itself out on the opposite bank.

CHAPTER III

Shan Loring



DRY summer had left Nugget Creek only half its normal size. But a wide, sandy bed had been carved in wetter years and there was twenty feet of barren soil on each side of the stream. From the east, pasture land led to the brink of the creek, but the western bank was piled high with eroded, sand-whipped rocks, and there was little fuel for the fire on that side. A few embers glowed redly where the flames had touched driftwood lodged between the boulders, but the blaze was quickly dying at the spot where the cattle entered.

Still riding at break-neck speed, the Masked Rider led the way into the creek, plowing a path through the milling cattle. Blue Hawk hurried up beside him, widening an aisle for Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell to follow. Giving Midnight his head, the robed horseman traveled swiftly across to the opposite bank where the rocks and drenching rain had put out the last streamers of fire. To the east flames were still crawling toward Nugget Creek, and the cattle remained nervous and noisy. Some of them clambered out behind the

masked man's mount, and went racing on across the black stubble of the burned-over area. He ignored the beasts now, knowing that many of them would be running and milling and upset until morning.

Cap Maxwell reined up beside the black stallion and brushed a mixture of perspiration and rain from his soot-smeared face.

"Put 'er there, Masked Rider!" the rancher said gratefully, extending a gnarled hand across his mount's neck. "Somebody was out to get me, but I reckon they wasn't so smart as they figured they was. They didn't take account of you and Blue Hawk!"

With a faint smile tugging at his firm lips, the black-clad man reached out to shake Cap Maxwell's hand. Then suddenly his arm withdrew in a whip-lashing motion. Cap Maxwell stared in surprise as the Masked Rider's Colt came to life in his right hand. The rancher raised his arms hesitantly, then lowered them sheepishly as he saw that the gun was not aimed at him.

The Masked Rider's gaze had lifted beyond Cap Maxwell's stocky shoulders, and the six-gun was pointed at an object in the rocks twenty yards upstream. Lighted by the firelight on the eastern bank, a pair of worn, flat-heeled boots were visible at the edge of the rock. While the Masked Rider watched them expectantly, one of the boots moved, disappeared from sight behind the stone.

"Come out of there!" the robed outlaw commanded grimly. "You, in the rocks come out or I'll cut loose on yuh!"

Always on guard against bounty-hunters who led him an endless chase for his life, the black-clad man had not lost his alertness even in the stampede. He knew the disastrous fire had been no accident, that it had been deliberately started, and he was not certain that the men who had fired the brush were not still lurking in the safety of the twisting stream.

Without a word, Blue Hawk eased his pony farther away from the group on the bank, ready to circle the hidden man if a fight should start. The Masked Rider repeated his command, and then the gun in his hand bucked and roared. Sparks flew from the rough rock as the slug chipped the corner of it and went humming on

into the rainy night.

His thumb hooked back the hammer again while he waited for some answer. But he did not have to fire again. A shadowy figure raised up behind the rock and came bounding toward him, whimpering and growling like a frightened pup. Even the steady nerves of the Robin Hood outlaw were jolted as he debated a moment whether the creature was man or beast.

The strange, watery-mouthed voice told him that his eyes had not deceived him about the boots. The man who came toward him moved in a rocking, lumbering gait as if his body were overbalanced as well as his mind. He was as big as a grizzly, and as unkempt and shaggy. Stringy red hair fell from under a battered black hat and was entangled in a ragged beard of the same brilliant hue. From the mass of hair that was both head and face, two yellow-green eyes glared out with a glassy sheen. Dirt-caked Oregon pants were stuffed into the tops of the run-over mining boots and brawny, hairy arms protruded far beyond the cuffs of an ill-fitting flannel shirt.

THE wild-looking red-haired giant stumbled toward the masked man's horse, dragging a half-filled grass sack along the rough earth behind him, his throaty voice still spitting out mushy words.

"Don't shoot me—don't shoot me!" he begged in a monotone. "I'm your old friend, I'm your old friend."

Silent and puzzled, the masked man continued to gaze down at the bedraggled giant, wondering at his odd habit of saying everything twice. He found it took an effort to gaze into those burning green eyes, knowing that they were the windows to a soul crazed by greed or to a mind tortured by imaginary horrors. Part of his curiosity was satisfied then as Cap Maxwell swung to the ground and approached the man with a sympathetic grimace.

"Shan Loring!" Maxwell exclaimed in surprise. "Thank goodness yuh had enough sense to get away from the fire. I might of knowed yuh was somewhere in Moonstone Valley."

Shan Loring took his gaze from the grim figure on the black stallion for the

first time. He looked at Cap Maxwell as if stunned, and then reached out one hairy hand to pat the old rancher's shoulder.

"It's you, Cap. It's you, Cap. We'll pay everything we owe them. Everything we owe. Milo Trapp, too. We'll pay Milo Trapp and shut him up. Shut him up."

Cap Maxwell nodded and put his arm around the red-head's yard-wide shoulders, talking to him in the same soothing tones that he would use to comfort a crying child. As Loring's irritating babble subsided, Maxwell turned back toward the Masked Rider to explain this strange interruption.

Shan Loring did not give him a chance to speak. He turned his eyes again to the black-clad horseman and the Robin Hood outlaw sensed a furtive change in his expression. He tightened his grip on the waiting six-gun, but Shan Loring made no threatening move. Instead he hobbled closer and looked pleadingly up at the mounted man.

"I'll pay you every cent I owe you, every cent I owe you," he jabbered eagerly. "Nobody's going to lose on the Weeping Woman Mine. Nobody. You don't have to wear a mask and use a gun to get what's coming to you from Shan Loring. Not from Shan Loring. I'll pay it all—pay it all!"

While the masked man continued to stare in wonder, the giant red-head pulled the dirty grass sack around in front of him and held the flaps open.

"See! See what I've got! It was a good day. They're all good stones, good stones. You can have the money I get; the money I get for the stones."

After a close, penetrating scrutiny of the bearded face, the Masked Rider dropped his eyes to the sack. Inside were several glistening, blue-white rocks. All of them were about the size of a walnut, small and flat and circular. The black-clad man had been curious about the contents of the sack since the bedraggled creature had first dragged it out of the rock pile. He had expected it to contain something to which Loring would attribute some value, but the sight of the opalescent rocks made him regard the man with a new feeling of pity.

"Moonstones," Cap Maxwell explained as the Masked Rider lifted a questioning

glance to the rancher's face. "Some freak of nature left 'em scattered around the granite ledges after volcanoes and hot sun melted the feldspar out of these rocks. Yuh can find a lot of 'em here if yuh hunt hard enough, but they ain't worth much. Back east they polish the best ones and use 'em in jewelry. Shan thinks he can gather up enough of 'em to pay off everybody that bought stock in the Weepin' Woman Mine which left a lot of us broke around here. Yuh'll have to overlook, Shan. He's harmless."

The Masked Rider had been lingering at the creek bank for a reason, and now a glimmer of interest lighted his pale blue eyes as he interrupted Maxwell's explanation.

"Yuh said a lot of people went broke," the masked man pursued. "You, too?"

Maxwell nodded. "Me and Shan Loring, Thad Tate and Grady Sloan. We was hit hardest because we were the owners and are bein' held responsible to everybody that we sold stock to when we raised the money to bring in machinery. I reckon you done figured this fire yuh pulled us out of wasn't no accident, so yuh might as well know what me and Whit think caused it."

HIS seamed face sagging with the fatigue that unpleasant memories brought to him, Cap Maxwell told the Masked Rider the story of the Weeping Woman Mine. The robbed outlaw took his eyes from the rancher's face only once during the conversation, and that was when Shan Loring slung the rock-filled sack over his shoulder and went plodding down the edge of the dry creek bed toward the mouth of the hollow. Despite his interest in Cap Maxwell's problem, the disguised horseman could not keep his mind completely off of the shaggy red-head.

Cap Maxwell's story was not an unusual one in a land where countless false gold strikes had raised the hopes of men to soaring heights one moment and then smashed them into impoverished dejection the next. But the repercussions of Maxwell's mining venture were of such a tragic and mysterious nature that the Masked Rider was deeply concerned.

It had been Shan Loring who had plunged Moonstone Valley into an uproar

four years ago. At that time, Loring had just arrived from the East where he had studied mineralogy and mining in some of the best schools. After a few months of prospecting, he had struck what appeared to be a rich vein of gold. Not having sufficient wealth to finance a large-scale mining operation, he had sought help from some of the ranchers in Moonstone Valley.

Three of the cattlemen, Cap Maxwell, Grady Sloan and Thad Tate had joined with Shan Loring to form the Nugget Creek Mining Company. They had sold stock in the organization to several other people, promising them a rich interest rate on their investment.

Maxwell, Sloan and Tate had mortgaged their ranches and put every dollar they could scrape together into mining machinery and tools. The mine opened amid all the bustle and excitement that would accompany any unveiling of a treasure chest—and closed a month later without having produced enough color to meet its payroll.

Expensive machinery was pulled out of the ground and freighted back to the dealers who reclaimed it for unpaid debts. Stockholders not only received no interest, but lost their initial investment as well. Thad Tate, Grady Sloan and Cap Maxwell were left penniless. They turned back to their ranches, now neglected and burdened by mortgages which were to be paid within five years from the date of issue.

"The shock of it all left Shan sort of—well, loco," Maxwell concluded wearily. "He thinks everybody he sees is a stockholder, and he keeps thinkin' he can pay 'em off with moonstones. Poor hombre don't know that it was me and the others who had the load of that job on our shoulders. But he keeps tryin'. Ships two-three boxes of them rocks a week, but mebbe one out of ten is bought for jewelry back east. Lately some fool road agent has been holdin' up the stage and stealin' them. No wonder Shan is crazy! I'm almost crazy myself, wha, with everybody afraid to work for me, and debts pilin' up against the Diamond Cross."

With Maxwell's words running through his mind, the masked man studied the rancher's ruddy face a while in silence. Then he said:

"You talk like you're tryin' to make



The giant redhead reached for Morgan and fastened an iron grip upon his shoulder (CHAP. VI)

up these losses all by yourself. I understand why Shan Loring doesn't help, but what about Sloan and Tate?"

"They're dead," Maxwell replied softly. "Killed right near the Weepin' Woman Mine. The mine is about two miles below here on the creek. What's more, Sloan's daughter Velma ain't been seen since she found her pa on the trail and brought him in to Cactus for burial. Somebody is after us all! The fire was meant to get me."

CHAPTER IV

Bounty Hunters



HUDDERING at the memory of the fiery death he had narrowly escaped, Cap Maxwell let his eyes wander back over the milling cattle in the creek to the wisps of fire that were dying out on the far bank and leaving the hollow dark and dreary. The rain, running off his seamed face like tears, added to the sadness of his countenance and the Masked Rider knew that Maxwell had lost much tonight. It would take days to gather the scattered cattle again.

In his brief talk with the man, the Robin Hood outlaw had learned much of the character of Cap Maxwell and it aroused a sincere desire to help the old rancher. Maxwell was of that rare school whose dominating trait was an untarnished honesty. To treat his fellow man fairly was an obsession with Maxwell. Where other men would have sought exclusion behind laws and customs, Maxwell had willingly assumed the burden of repaying all who had lost money in the Weeping Woman Mine. He felt that his undying honesty was the one gift that would carve his name among the immortals of the frontier, and to deny its fulfillment was like extinguishing the spark of his soul, drowning his spirit and leaving him alone in the world without purpose or intent. It was a difficult thing to understand for most men, as all sacrifices seem fatalistic and foolish to those who do not possess the goodness to make them.

But the Masked Rider understood the torture of Maxwell's frustrated ambition, sympathized with him because of the

threats that menaced his life. Even now the damp, pungent air that swept into the hollow from Moonstone Valley seemed heavy with mystery and peril, and the masked man felt that death still stalked its dark recesses. He was impatient to retire to the hills from whence he had come a short while before, for he had already remained in the open longer than was his custom. He glanced across at Blue Hawk, found the Yaqui fidgeting impatiently in the saddle, but still he continued to question the rancher about events preceding the fire.

It was no accident that the Masked Rider had been near Moonstone Valley tonight, and he wanted to learn all he could about the mystery that surrounded the place. Word of Cap Maxwell's troubled ranch had traveled all the way to Texas. There, from a wandering cowboy who had left the Diamond Cross as soon as he had learned that its owner might be earmarked for death like the others of the mining firm, Blue Hawk had heard the story and relayed it to the Masked Rider.

Knowing that here was a man whose life was haunted by fear and worry every minute, the Robin Hood outlaw had pointed Midnight's nose immediately toward Arizona. They had just arrived on the granite rim of Moonstone Valley when the first streamers of fire had shot across the little hollow in the northern corner of the crater. Bawling cattle and yelling men had told them of trouble below, and they had ridden recklessly to help them.

"I've heard a lot about yuh, Masked Rider," Cap Maxwell said hopefully as he answered the robed outlaw's last question, "and I want yuh to know I'm believin' only the good part after what yuh done tonight. If yuh'd be good enough to sign on with me, I might be able to scrape together enough cash to pay yuh to get to the bottom of what's goin' on here."

"And what he ain't got, I'll make up," Whit Berry added firmly. "I've got a little saved, and if you could just dig up the coyote that made way with Velma that's all I'd ask. You could leave the rest to me." The tall foreman patted his twin Colts, and a hard glint came into his steely eyes.

The Masked Rider thought hurriedly for some word of encouragement for the

two troubled men. But he did not have time to utter those words.

Blue Hawk reined his gray pony swiftly alongside the stallion, and the masked man sensed the Yaqui's alarm.

"We must go, Senor," Blue Hawk said urgently. He spoke perfect English in the meticulous manner taught him by padres in the mission schools he had attended in his youth. And the only name he ever used for the black-clad horseman, regardless of the role the man might be playing, was "Senor."

"What's the trouble, Hawk?" the masked man asked quickly.

"There are sounds in the night, Senor. I think there is someone in the rocks ahead of us. With the rain it is hard to—"

"You're wrong, redskin," a growling voice broke in calmly. "We're right behind yuh. Don't move a muscle or we'll collect a reward on dead bodies instead of men!"

REALIZING that he should have obeyed the Yaqui's unfailing senses without question, the Masked Rider whirled quickly in the saddle. Two men came cautiously out from the dark rocks, both hunched tensely over the six-guns in their hands. They had come from downstream, the soft sand along the creek muffling their footsteps until they had crept within a few feet of the masked man.

The man who had spoken came first, a stocky, dark-skinned man with burly shoulders. His black sullen eyes darted nervously around under shaggy dark brows as he approached the robed outlaw with two guns cocked in his fists. A step behind him, and a little to the left, walked a stringy, square-shouldered man in dudish range dress. A Colt was gripped in his right hand, and his shifty gray eyes had already selected a target on the Masked Rider's chest.

Though he had never seen the men before, they were not complete strangers to the black-clad horseman. A few moments before, Cap Maxwell had spoken of his two night riders, thinking they had escaped through the mouth of the hollow before the fire closed in. But they, too, had sought refuge in the creek farther south. The Masked Rider's first guess at their identity proved correct. The burly, dark-eyed man was Hobe Venter and the

stringy gunman in the scarlet shirt and white Stetson was Stacy Lipps.

Whit Berry was the first to speak when the men stepped into view, and the tall foreman's voice was heavy with anger.

"Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps!" Berry said coldly. "So yuh thought of the creek as a place to save yore own necks, but didn't offer to drive the cattle this way before they stampeded. Mebbe yuh wanted them cows to trample me and Cap!"

Venter and Lipps ignored Whit Berry's reprimand, stepping apart so that one of them could cover the robed outlaw and the other Blue Hawk.

"This is my lucky night," Hobe Venter continued in his guttural voice as he faced the mounted men. "I reckon Sheriff Walt Starns will be countin' reward money into my paws all day when I take you in. You're probably the same gent that's been holdin' up the Cactus stage for the past three months. Starns has rode hisself sore tryin' to catch that road agent!"

Gaunt old Cap Maxwell moved his horse forward a step and glared down at the two gunmen, cursing angrily. He reminded them of the help he had received from the Masked Rider and his Indian companion, ordered Venter to put his gun away. Whit Berry joined the rancher's appeal, his hands hovering threateningly over his guns.

"You put them irons away or yuh're through at the Diamond Cross," the foreman warned.

Venter answered him with a rattling chuckle, his eyes daring Whit Berry to complete his draw. "Both of yuh save yore wind. Yuh can't fire me. I quit an hour ago. There ain't enough dinero in Arizony to get me back on that spread, 'cause Cap Maxwell's got the coffin sign on him and yuh can't tell who he might take with him when he goes. I'd rather have the bounty on this Masked Rider lobo. Climb down, mister, and make it slow."

During the exchange between Venter and the others, the Masked Rider had remained motionless in the saddle, his arms slightly raised. The greedy gleam in the stocky man's eyes had told him how the argument would end, but it had given him time to think. The masked man glanced covertly at Blue Hawk, his blue eyes turning the color of glistening ice.

It was a silent signal, and the Yaqui understood.

While Venter waited for his command to be obeyed, the Masked Rider swung one leg slowly out of the stirrup as if to dismount. Instantly he was sailing through the air in a daring leap. At the same time, Blue Hawk whirled to the ground like a springing bobcat.

Hobe Venter did not have time to shoot. He didn't even have time to think. The black-clad horseman came at him like a swooping hawk. One hundred ninety pounds of bone and muscle smacked Venter down, making his guns useless as the Masked Rider landed on top of him.

VENTER spat out a muffled curse as the masked man's ballooning black robe smothered his words. He stuck up a stiffened arm, tried to push the masked man away as they landed in the muddy soil. But the Masked Rider was like a dark, choking shadow. His broad shoulder weaved aside as Venter threw a fist at him, and then his own right hand smashed solidly against the burly man's thick lips, leaving them split and bloody. Pain sent a desperate strength through Venter's muscles and he heaved the masked man aside. The robed outlaw jumped to his feet like an acrobat as Venter reared up.

Roaring with fury, the gunman charged, both fists whirling in front of him. They would have been killing blows if they had landed, but they were without skill. The Masked Rider stepped lightly aside. Before Venter realized he had no target, the masked man's gloved fist cracked into the side of his head.

Venter wobbled like a drunken tenderfoot. He tried to shake his head, but the Masked Rider shook it for him with a back-hand blow, full of knuckles and leverage. Venter's jaw cracked like wind-whipped canvas as the back of the robed outlaw's right hand slapped him flatly.

His head fell over on his shoulder, and his feet went grotesquely the other way. The Masked Rider stood over him, ready to administer the trimmings to a finished fight. But Whit Berry declared the battle ended before Venter could struggle to his feet.

Still seeking an outlet for the anger the men had aroused in him, Whit Berry drew his guns as Venter went down the

second time.

"Get up, Venter," Berry ordered, "and take Stacy Lipps back to where yuh left yore horses. When yuh get there, ride hard and don't come back to the Diamond Cross. It's me and you, when you do, Venter!"

Shrugging, the Masked Rider turned aside and looked for Blue Hawk. The Yaqui was sitting astraddle Stacy Lipps' chest, his knees pinning the nattily-dressed man's arms down and his powerful hands clutching Lipps' throat in a throttling iron grip. Blue Hawk was working without sound, without expression, but with deadly purpose. He was not a killer by nature, but he lived by the law of self-preservation, and Lipps had staked his life against the Indian's own.

Swiftly, the Masked Rider moved over and touched the Yaqui's shoulder. Blue Hawk arose wordlessly and looked down at Stacy Lipps' writhing body. Air surged back into the slim gunman's lungs, and he lay there gasping like a dying calf. Then slowly he opened his eyes, cleared his throat painfully, and sat up.

Venter was helping him to his feet as Blue Hawk and the black-clad outlaw walked to their horses and swung back into saddle, their clothing squashing with wetness.

"Move on, Lipps," Whit Berry repeated grimly as the two men hesitated a few feet away, and then hurried on into the night. Cap Maxwell also had his Colt in his lap now, and the two men kept their eyes southward until they could no longer hear the gunmen's footsteps.

At last the old rancher nodded approvingly at his foreman and turned toward the spot where the Masked Rider's stallion had stood.

"Well, mister, what do yuh say to that offer I made—"

He realized he was talking to himself then, and grew silent. He met Whit Berry's puzzled glance and then squinted his eyes again into the darkness. Far up the gloomy creek-bed he saw the faint shadow of a flapping cloak and the dingy outline of a pair of mud-caked drill pants. Then the two strange riders were swallowed by the night.

"Come from nowhere, go back to nowhere," he mused thoughtfully. "We might as well hit out for the Diamond Cross,

Whit. Eight more miles through this rain, and I'll be ready for bed. You think we'll ever see them two hombres again, Whit? The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, that is?"

The tall foreman shifted wearily in his damp saddle. "I think we might."

He shook out his reins and nudged his horse forward, pointing southward toward the Diamond Cross. "It's a wet night, cold and lonesome. I wonder where Velma is tonight."

Cap Maxwell's shoulders sagged slightly as he looked at the young cowboy's face and did not reply. In his heart was a prayer that the miracles he had heard accredited to the Masked Rider were not mere legend, and that the Robin Hood rider had recognized the need of his help in Moonstone Valley.

CHAPTER V

Council in the Hills



RIDING in silence, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk cut away from the creek as soon as they were out of Cap Maxwell's sight. It took them only a few minutes to climb the saw-toothed ridge which sheltered the dog-leg hollow, and there they paused to collect

the horses they had left when they rode down to stop the stampede.

The Yaqui dismounted and fastened lead ropes to a pinto pack-horse and the hammerhead roan which he had left hobbled on the brushy slope. While Blue Hawk anchored the horses in position to be led, the Masked Rider remained in

the saddle, his eyes roving the dark land below him. At this height, he could see beyond the hollow's entrance, but the heavy darkness shrouded the great circular basin of Moonstone Valley. He was reviewing the strange incidents in which he had played a part tonight, and his thoughts were of tomorrow when he would pursue the questions that came to his mind as a result of them.

At a glance from Blue Hawk, who had remounted after securing the horses, the masked man spoke quietly to Midnight and moved on behind the Yaqui. They were looking for a suitable camping site, and this was a time when the Indian assumed leadership of the hard-riding team. His unerring instincts always guided him to a place of safety and convenience.

For half an hour they rode the crest of the ridge northward. At last they came to the base of a higher range, and Blue Hawk climbed on into the sparse junipers and pines until he reached the face of a sheer rock cliff. A small spring gushed out from the rocks, and nearby there was a cup-shaped depression in the cliff which the rain had not touched. Sweet mountain grass grew in tufts where the trees were farther apart, providing ample food for the horses.

"We will camp here, Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly, and immediately began making preparations. Dismounting, the Masked Rider removed his saddle and bed-roll from Midnight's back, and the Yaqui led the horses away and hobbled them for the night.

While he was gone, the Masked Rider gathered dry twigs and scattered deadwood along the base of the cliff and

[Turn page]

started a fire. As usual, Blue Hawk had chosen a position with all the caution and foresight the two riders of the danger trails constantly exercised. Here they could not be approached from behind, and were invisible from above because of the cavelike cavity in the rocks. Still it was near enough to Moonstone Valley for them to reach it quickly if the occasion demanded their presence there.

Presently the Yaqui returned and rummaged for food and cooking utensils in the pack which the pinto had carried. When the meal was prepared, and both men were sitting against the heated rock wall with good food before them and the fire taking the dampness from their clothes, Blue Hawk mentioned their recent experience for the first time.

In a characteristically frank manner, the Yaqui put his plate aside and looked at the masked man beside him.

"What do you make of it, Senor?" he asked quietly. He knew where the Masked Rider's thoughts lay at that moment.

It was some time before the robed outlaw replied, and Blue Hawk did not press him for an answer. Though he knew nothing of the man's past, not even his real name, the Yaqui was aware that at some time the Masked Rider had undergone extensive education. It was rumored that he had come from a family of high social and financial standing before some unknown incident had sent him forth on a trail of vengeance and reparation which he now rode without reservation. Blue Hawk had no proof that these things were true, and asked none, but he did know that the man had keen powers of observation and perception. It was these qualities, backed by a pair of lightning-fast guns and merciless fists, that had pulled the Robin Hood outlaw above the channels of common men. His confidence in the black-clad man's ability made Blue Hawk wait patiently now for his views.

ACTUALLY, the Masked Rider had not had time to draw any definite conclusions. Like Cap Maxwell, he agreed that the Weeping Woman Mine was responsible, directly or indirectly, for the reign of terror that was gaining momentum in Moonstone Valley. Two of the four men who had organized the mining firm had already died violent deaths. The

remaining two partners, Cap Maxwell and Shan Loring, seemed to be leading a tortuous existence.

Shan Loring was apparently the more miserable of the two. His great disappointment had affected his mind, leaving him a babbling, annoying mental wreck whose one driving thought was to gather enough moonstones in a hopeless attempt to repay those whom he had failed. Still there was something sinister and elusive about the giant redhead, and it was this more than his misfortune which made him unforgettable to the Masked Rider.

Burdened by a crushing indebtedness, Cap Maxwell's inordinate honesty had almost proved his undoing. The old rancher had personally promised each stockholder that their investment was a sound one, and that promise was as important to him as his life. Year after year he had taken all the money he could earn to make regular payments in accord with his promise.

In the meantime he had neglected other obligations, and now his very livelihood—his ranch—was in jeopardy. Maxwell had enough cattle on his scattered range to pay off the mortgage against his spread, but was unable to keep enough men to round them up for market. With his latest roundup crew gone, his cattle spooked and scattered, Maxwell was about ready to admit defeat.

Out of his last riding crew, Maxwell had made two bad choices—Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps. In addition to the attempt to capture him for the bounty on his head, the Masked Rider had other reasons to dislike Venter and Lipps. The men had the unmistakable brand of the owlhoot written in their manner and appearance, and such men were his natural foes.

Cap Maxwell's explanation of the situation in the hollow just before the fire started had also left a mark of suspicion in the masked man's mind. Venter's swinging lariat could have been a signal to the men who set the fire that it was time for them to act. The absence of any alarm from the night riders when Maxwell discovered the blaze strengthened this belief.

Presently the Masked Rider stood up slowly and shoved the embers of the fire closer together with his foot. Like the polished black leather of his holsters, his

boots were plain and undecorated. They had no distinctive markings that might identify them as belonging to the Masked Rider if he still wore them when he was unmasked.

"Looks like a matter of vengeance, Hawk," the black-clad man said then. "Somebody that lost money in that mine might be impatient with Maxwell's slow way of payin' em back. Some other rancher might have lost his shirt in that deal, and that kind of grudge is hard to forget. At least a man named Thad Tate and another named Grady Sloan got killed for some reason. Both of 'em died with their eyes bugged out and their mouths twisted like they was scared to death, accordin' to Maxwell. Tate had been shot in the stomach, but Sloan had been pulled off his horse and beaten to death with a rock. Half his skull was caved in."

Blue Hawk nodded and looked up, noticing that the Masked Rider's blue eyes had again faded to that wintry bleakness that reflected his disapproval and anger. He was staring off into the darkness toward Moonstone Valley and his brown hands were clenching and relaxing in rhythmic movements, as if they were impatient for action.

"We've bumped square into a death fight, Hawk, and I don't like what I found," the robed outlaw continued after a brief pause.

"The Weeping Woman Mine was aptly named, Senior," Blue Hawk conceded solemnly. "It comes from an ancient Indian legend about squaws who made the creeks with tears shed over warriors who did not return from battle. Ah, yes, the mine has brought its owners sorrow."

ONCE more the masked man kicked impatiently at the fire. "Maybe we can do somethin' about that. I feel right sorry for Cap Maxwell and the young foreman who has lost his sweetheart. It must be hard for Maxwell to lay down at night and sleep, considerin' that he might be the killer's next victim."

"There is much cruelty here, Senior," Blue Hawk declared forcefully. "Even the loco one, this Shan Loring, has no rest from hate. Loring's moonstones are being stolen by some bandit. They are of no rich value, and it is like robbing the blind or an old woman. It is a bitter joke

to punish him!"

The robed outlaw made no comment about Shan Loring's stolen moonstones, but it was a circumstance that puzzled him. Hobe Venter had sought to connect the Masked Rider with the stage robberies and he had said Sheriff Walt Starns was eager to capture the bandit. Though most frontier lawmen were competent and conscientious, the Robin Hood rider had learned that in counties as sparsely settled as this one they were usually notoriously lazy. Few would brave the rocky trails and burning sun of a region like Moonstone Valley in search for a bandit who had committed no greater crime than to steal a few rocks from an addled prospector. It made him eager to meet Walt Starns and learn more about the stage robberies for which the Masked Rider might be blamed in the future.

Peering keenly at his silent companion, Blue Hawk said shrewdly: "You have other thoughts, Senior. We will stay and help these people?"

Momentarily the firm brown face beneath the domino mask relaxed and the Masked Rider chuckled. "You want that as much as I do, Hawk. Even if we are liable to stick our necks in the noose that's waitin' for Cap Maxwell. But neither of us aim to let that old feller die if we can help it. Besides, I don't like the thought of some girl bein' in the hands of the gent that got Sloan and Tate."

Kneeling, the masked man began loosening the ropes on his bedroll. "We'll get some sleep, Hawk, and then take a hand in this game. I've got a feelin' it's a hand that'll have to hold a fast gun!"

CHAPTER VI

Where Death Waits



COULDED down across from Blue Hawk at the cook-fire which the Yaqui built near the towering white cliff the next morning, was a man who had little resemblance to the grim, black-clad horseman who had accompanied the Indian here the night before.

He was a tall man, dark-haired and muscular. The energy and vitality that

sparkled in his pale blue eyes seemed to contradict itself in the leisurely way the man moved about, and in the mellow drawl of his voice. A glance at the roll-brimmed brown Stetson perched cockily on one side of his head, and the rugged handsomeness of his face showed that he was easy-going, good-natured and accustomed to the feel of sun and wind in his face.

His soft flannel shirt and plain cowboy levis fitted him well enough to reveal cords of powerful muscle stretched across his six-foot frame. The worn butts of the twin .45 Colts thonged to his thighs proved that the guns belonged to a man who used them.

"So it is a job for Wayne Morgan," Blue Hawk said eagerly, scraping a generous portion of bacon and eggs into the cowboy's plate.

The dark-haired waddy nodded, grinning at Blue Hawk's apparent pleasure over the prospect of action which Wayne Morgan's appearance in a town always foretold. The hammerhead roan which replaced the stallion when the Masked Rider assumed the role of a wandering cowboy was saddled and waiting. The robe and mask which the Robin Hood outlaw had worn the night before were stored in his bedroll.

"That's right, Hawk," Morgan replied between mouthfuls of food. "The Diamond Cross ought to be able to use either a gunhand or a rider. At least that's where I'm headin'. I hope Maxwell's luck held through the night, 'cause from here out Wayne Morgan is goin' to hang close to his coat tail. If the gent that got Tate and Sloan comes to the Diamond Cross lookin' for trouble then, he'll find it."

Still discussing the peculiar task which they had wilfully accepted in Moonstone Valley, the two men finished their meal in the leisurely fashion of those who realize that fate might easily decree it as their last. It was always this way with the Robin Hood outlaw and his Indian companion. Though they did not speak of it, they both realized that to side with Cap Maxwell was to defy the wrath of the same mysterious marauder who had turned the old rancher's life into a nightmare of fear.

As Morgan arose, Blue Hawk walked along beside him until the dark-haired cowboy mounted the hammerhead roan.

Morgan knew why he was there, for neither the wandering cowboy nor the Masked Rider ever played a lone hand when battling against the one-sided odds piled up by a lawless combine. An expert with knife, rifle or six-gun, the faithful Yaqui had more than once saved his companion's life, making stronger the many bonds that bound together the legendary team.

In answer to Blue Hawk's unspoken question, Morgan said: "Your job is to check up on a few facts in Cactus, Hawk. Find out all you can about the stage robberies. It will be hard for the Masked Rider to work here as long as he's connected with that."

Nodding, Blue Hawk raised his hand in a farewell salute as Wayne Morgan reined the roan toward Moonstone Valley. The cowboy rode slouched and loose-joined in the saddle, his lips pursed in a melancholy whistle as he cut through the junipers and pines and worked toward the rocky trail that wound down into the valley. He drifted along like any aimless rider who had answered the call of far-off trails, but his pale blue eyes were keenly alive beneath the shading brim of his Stetson. For, though he had changed his dress and appearance and had adopted a soft Texas drawl in place of the Masked Rider's deep-chested tones, the same tense thoughts that had weighted the mind of the robed outlaw were now held by Wayne Morgan.

IN THE eye-piercing light of the fiery morning sun which had swiftly evaporated all signs of the night's rain, Wayne Morgan found Moonstone Valley strangely dead and still. Having skirted the cowtown of Cactus to the south, and much of the valley's rim the day before, the dark-haired waddy had already memorized a sketchy map of the region.

He passed quickly over the burned-over stubble of the little dog-leg hollow, noticing that most of Cap Maxwell's cattle had strayed again into the by-passing gulleys and arroyos that broke away from the western bank of Nugget Creek. This was land owned by no one, but used by the Diamond Cross for winter range because of the protection of the forked ridges and the grass provided by the stream. He had heard the rancher say that the home

ranch was some eight miles to the south.

Coming out of the mouth of the hollow was like going from one world to another. Brush and grass faded abruptly into a labyrinth of upthrust boulders, eroded rust-red spires and steep-walled canyons. Deceptive rock slides changed the trail day by day, filling one path and opening another. Even Nugget Creek had not tried to solve the riddle of passage here, and the lack of water made the northern half of Moonstone Valley barren. The creek delved underground a short distance below the mouth of the hollow, appeared again two miles farther on at the Weeping Woman Mine and then tunneled through subterranean depths for many more miles before it reappeared just outside of Cactus.

Morgan held to the banks of the creek as long as it lasted, and then tackled the maze of canyons and draws that glared at him from all angles. Several wrong guesses brought him to a dead end, and he retraced himself many times before he finally spotted a patch of green a half mile to his left. He paused on a slight rise to orient himself, for he knew the tiny oasis marked the approximate location of the deserted gold mine. Maxwell had said the claim was near a gulch where Nugget Creek again came to the surface.

His thoughts leaving the problem of travel for a moment to go back to the things Cap Maxwell had told him of the ill-fated mine, Morgan remained idle longer than he had intended. About him the air was hot and stifling. Even the lizards and crickets had been stilled by this first fiery blast of the demon sun. But it was the noiseless, lifeless calm that made the air seem so heavy with menace and Morgan searched mentally for the weird secret hidden by the dead drab rocks that stretched before him. Only the short stretch of water ahead gave a scrap of life to the place, and it was there that life had ended.

"If Tate and Sloan had already given it up," Morgan mused aloud, "I wonder what they was doin' over there at the mine when they was killed."

The dark-haired waddy had expected no answer to his perplexity at that moment, and the sound of a voice from behind startled him. Morgan had wheeled his horse until there was a narrow ledge

at his back, and the eerie stillness had hinted of no other presence. Now he whirled around in alarm, kneeling his horse the same way as he turned. The throaty, mush tones had told him what he would find.

Shan Loring said only one word as he stared down at Wayne Morgan.

"Fools!" Loring spat fiercely. The giant red-headed man stood beside the flat piece of rock which had sheltered him when Morgan appeared. Standing on the ledge at a level with Morgan's saddle, his massive shoulders slightly hunched and his knotted fists dangling near his bent knees, Shan Loring towered above the mounted man like a hairy, evil-faced monster.

He was not sure that the wild-looking miner could grasp any simple truth, but Morgan decided it would be best to humor Shan Loring, agree with anything he said. The angry, burning light in the man's green eyes warned the cowboy to be on guard.

"I reckon you're mighty near right, pard," Morgan drawled quietly. "Any cattlemen that starts messin' around with minin' is askin' for trouble. There's cattlemen and there's miners, and yuh seldom find one man that makes a good thing out of both."

THE redhead's staring eyes never wavered, failed to show any glimmer or agreement or disagreement, and Morgan felt his words were wasted.

"You killed them—killed them both!" Loring grated through bearded lips. "Yuh killed my friends and I've waited for you."

Morgan frowned in a puzzled way and held up a restraining hand. "Now, look, mister. I'm a stranger hereabouts and ain't never killed—"

Shan Loring did not give him time to finish. The giant redhead let go of the ledge and fastened upon Morgan—over two hundred pounds of wild brute force intent upon destroying the man on the horse. Morgan had known it was coming, had dreaded it. He was at a disadvantage in more ways than one. He could not kill the big miner, for a man in Shan Loring's condition could hardly be held responsible for his actions. On the other hand, if Loring killed Morgan it would be regarded merely as an unfortunate cir-

cumstance and the crazed man would receive no punishment.

Morgan had little time to think about these things. Shan Loring's immense body slammed into him like a thunderbolt, knocking him out of the saddle and crushing him to the hard ground. Sparks exploded across the cowboy's vision and a roaring waterfall grew up in his head under the shocking impact. He rolled a few feet along the sloping rise, Shan Loring grunting and snorting as he came after him.

Any sympathy Morgan might have had for the man was destroyed. In spite of his outward serenity, the dark-haired cowboy had shared more rough and tumble fights than he could count. Experience had made him an expert with his fists, and it had taught him to recognize motives as well. Regardless of what imaginary grudge had stirred him to such savagery, Morgan knew there could be no immunity for the miner. Unless he was stopped, Shan Loring meant to kill Wayne Morgan with his bare hands!

As Morgan stopped his fall at last, the bearded man was almost on top of him. The cowboy started to stand up to meet the charge and then ducked quickly back to the ground. Loring covered the last few feet in a mighty leap, trying to jump straight into the dark-haired waddy's face. Hugging the ground, Morgan watched his chance. His hand darted out, gripped one of the miner's flying feet and held on.

Shan Loring fell like a felled tree, his meaty body crunching flatly as he landed. For a brief instant his senses seemed restored. He cursed furiously with pain, jerked his leg free. He was up again like a cat, a smudge of blood mixed with the dirt in his stringy beard.

Wayne Morgan clambered up in front of him, hard fists cocked expectantly. But Loring did not rush him. The giant redhead started a slow, pacing circle around the cowboy. His even white teeth gleamed like ivory buried in red velvet as the beard parted at the lips in a determined scowl.

"Yuh may be too far gone to reason with," Morgan said tightly, "but mebbe yuh can still learn a lesson. Come and get it, pard!"

Shan Loring accepted the challenge.

Swift and sure as a cougar, he glided in and slung a mauling fist at the cowboy's square chin. There was a speed in the man which Morgan had not contemplated, and the blow almost caught him napping. He saw it in time to lift a shoulder, but that hard, hairy fist still left a stinging bruise on Morgan's jaw.

Morgan did not wait for the miner again. He carried the fight to Loring, dancing in close and feinting to draw the man's guard down. At first he thought his strategy was successful, for Shan Loring's chin was an easy target.

Bunching his shoulders, Morgan smashed his left hand into the bearded face. Loring stumbled back a step, but the cowboy's fist felt like it had just struck a rock wall. There was more power in the cowboy's right, however, and Morgan edged in to deliver the blow. His fist shot over the redhead's shoulder as Loring dodged aside, and Morgan knew he had walked into a trap!

APPARENTLY the bearded man was unable to cope with Morgan's style of battle, for his broad, perspiring face was still unguarded. But there was deadly purpose behind Shan Loring's shattered defense. He had dropped his burly arms to his sides, luring the cowboy in close. Now those long, sinewy arms shot out and grabbed the cowboy around the waist, dragging him in like steel tentacles.

Before Morgan could tear himself free, Shan Loring had his fingers locked, his chin boring into the cowboy's chest and was crushing him in a powerful bear-hug. As the vise-like grip tightened on him, Morgan felt his spine groaning with the strain. Dizziness crept through him as his lungs were choked off by the pressure. His knees grew weak and uncertain, and the roar returned to his head.

He pounded the giant's back with his fists, jabbed at the man's ribs, but Shan Loring held on. Morgan bit his lips and braced his feet in an attempt to break the stranglehold; Loring only grunted louder, bored harder with his chin and strained to cave the cowboy's ribs with his mighty strength.

Bells chimed frantically in Morgan's ears, warning him that unconsciousness was not far off. He tried to force his foggy mind to answer his needs, but weakness

made planning a strenuous chore. Then the reflexes that had guided him through worse battles sprang to life, and Morgan abruptly sagged in Loring's arms. That sudden surrender of his entire weight made the man lose balance, tumble forward. Morgan gave him momentum by shoving his feet against the ground and heaving upward.

Loring went sailing over Morgan's back as his arms slipped free. He tumbled down the slope in a flying somersault. The cowboy dashed down the rise behind him, gasping for air and blinking his eyes to keep his senses.

Shaking his head like an angered bull, Shan Loring tried to scramble to his feet, but Wayne Morgan didn't give him a chance. He had been too easy with the man at first, seeking to bluff him out of the fight. But now he spared nothing.

Without waiting for the man to rise, the cowboy reached down and gripped the front of his dirty flannel shirt, yanked him upright. As soon as he had him that way, he shoved his right fist into his face like a battering ram. He dropped him, and then hauled him up again, repeating the same pattern.

Loring tried to fight back, tugged at his shirt and kicked wickedly at Morgan's abdomen, but the dark-haired waddy's own anger was stirred now, and nothing could stop him. He flattened Loring on the ground four times, and still the red-head growled and snorted and clawed at him. The fifth time he was as limp as a wet rag when he went down and Morgan let him lay.

His chest heaving with exertion, the dark-haired waddy stood still a minute to

collect his strength. And it was then that he got his first close glimpse of Shan Loring's features. Under the brilliant light of the sun, he found that the miner was not as old as he had believed when he saw him the night before. Through the coarse red beard his skin was firm and white, and his eyes had none of the crow-foot wrinkles that come with age. Without the beard and scraggly long hair, Shan Loring would be a rather handsome, square-faced man of about thirty-five.

Shrugging, Morgan gave Shan Loring's battered face a final scrutiny and walked back to his horse. The redhead would awake in a few minutes with a sore jaw, but with as much sense as he ever had.

"They ought to put that gent in a home somewhere before he kills somebody," he said to the roan as he mounted and turned again toward the Diamond Cross Ranch. "I hope I never tangle with him again, 'cause he's got more strength in them arms of his than two men ought to have. Can't figure why he jumped me, that-away."

CHAPTER VII

Little Joe



IT WAS almost noon when Morgan finally found his way out of the rocks and rode down through green-topped knolls and over a level plain that looked more like cattle country. Several small streams cut through these hills, and the dark-haired

[Turn page]

cowboy selected one of these as his guide and followed its course.

A few minutes later he rode through a stand of walnut trees and saw the buildings of a ranch ahead. Since the fight with Shan Loring he had been traveling chiefly by instinct, utilizing all his plains lore, and he was rewarded with success when he saw that the horses in the pole corral wore the Diamond Cross brand. There was no one in sight around the long, low-roofed bunkhouse nearby, and Morgan went on to the sprawling, adobe house fifty yards away.

He had just dropped his reins, and was stepping from saddle when Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell walked down from the pillared veranda. They stopped at his horse's head, regarding him silently until Morgan spoke. Both men looked far more beaten and exhausted now than they had last night. But since he knew them only as the Masked Rider, the dark-haired waddy veiled his curiosity and grinned amiably. He was more determined than ever to make a good impression here, for he wanted to know what had kept Maxwell and Whit Berry from their beds after the stampede was over.

"The name's Wayne Morgan, gents," the cowboy drawled quietly. "The occupation is workin' a little, ridin' a whole lot. Right now I'm hankerin' to work a little."

Whit Berry returned Morgan's friendly grin, evidently impressed by the cowboy's happy-go-lucky attitude. He introduced himself and the gaunt, gray-haired rancher, and Morgan shook hands with them. Afterward, nothing more was said while Maxwell and the foreman sized up the husky, quiet-spoken waddy who seemed unconcerned about their close scrutiny. Actually, Morgan was still speculating on the sleepless dark circles under the eyes of the others.

"What can you do?" Maxwell asked at last. "We ain't exactly needin' a single rider unless he's good enough to round up a herd of fire-scared cattle all by himself."

Morgan seemed to give the cattleman's question a lot of thought before he answered. He glanced at the coiled rope on his saddlehorn, hooked his thumbs against his belt just above the jutting butts of his two black Colts and grinned at the rancher.

"I won't grow old here nor break my

back, but I'll do yuh a day's work every time yuh ask it."

It was the kind of answer Cap Maxwell had expected from a man who had all the appearance of a tophand, and the tired lines of his face faded momentarily as he chuckled. Then he told Morgan frankly that the Diamond Cross was in a difficult financial tangle, and that his wages would be in an uncertain state. While the rancher talked, Morgan noticed that his eyes strayed often to the low-hung guns, and he was certain Whit Berry had made a signal to Maxwell which had aroused suspicion.

"One thing more, Morgan," Maxwell concluded. "I would feel better with a pair of fast guns here, but I'd want to be sure they was square with the law. Now, how—"

Before the rancher could add a question, Wayne Morgan's fingers and wrists had blurred in hazy motion and the twin Colts were dangling in his hands, pointing carelessly at Cap Maxwell's feet. The friendly grin was still on the cowboy's lips. The draw had been made without any visible effort or thought.

Glancing aside at Whit Berry's awed face, Morgan hefted the guns experimentally in his hands.

"Most forgot I had 'em on me," he explained calmly. "But I ain't on the dodge, gents, if that's what's worryin' yuh." He dropped the Colts lightly back in place. "Well, what about the job?"

"By the Saints, yuh're hired, Morgan!" Cap Maxwell stepped forward and clapped the cowboy on the shoulder. "I've set here and shivered and shook long enough for fear some fool was goin' to step in an start throwin' lead at me. Any objections, Whit?"

WHIT BERRY shook his head. "It's a good idea, Cap. Between Morgan and the Masked Rider we might get some things straightened out."

At this outburst of approval, Morgan made no secret of his curiosity about the trouble of which they hinted. Though he had learned most of the facts, he could not reveal his knowledge without risking discovery of his dual identity.

"Whit, you look after his horse," Maxwell said to the foreman. "Come on in the house, Morgan, and I'll tell yuh what

you'll be up against."

Sitting in the comparative coolness of the spacious, well-furnished Diamond Cross living room, Wayne Morgan feigned shocked interest in the story of the weeping Woman Mine. Then suddenly his interest was genuine. Cap Maxwell stood up and started pacing the floor uneasily while he told the cowboy of the incident that had kept him awake all night.

"Somethin' happened last night that should give me new hope," Maxwell said, rubbing his jutting chin thoughtfully, "but it just worries me more. I'm afraid it's some kind of bait, and a man livin' on borrowed time can't afford to bite on nothin'. But gosh knows I need the money!"

"Somebody offered to lend yuh some money?" Morgan asked.

"Gold!" Cap Maxwell declared. "Not lend, but give it to me. A little while after me'n Whit got back here from Moonstone Valley last night, we heard a horse come up to the bunkhouse. It was there just a minute, and then gone again. When we both run out to investigate we found a buckskin pouch layin' in front of the door. It was filled with gold—little chunks of metal that looks like it had been took from mother lode!"

Wayne Morgan shared Cap Maxwell's doubt at that moment. This rich gift from an anonymous midnight prowler held the same hint of mystery that characterized every incident which evolved from Cap Maxwell's mining loss.

"Any idea where it came from—or why?" the cowboy asked in perplexity.

Whit Berry, the tall foreman, had returned from the corral in time to hear Morgan's question. He walked across the room now, withdrawing a small slip of paper from the pocket of his calfskin vest.

"We know exactly where it come from," Berry said, "and that's what puzzles us most. Why should some hombre who seems to be punishin' one partner, try to make it up to the other one."

Not until he had taken the slip of paper from the tall youngster's hand did Wayne Morgan understand Maxwell's nervousness. It was a printed note, and Morgan was impressed by the neatness and brevity of the message:

I SAW YOUR HERD SCATTERED LAST NIGHT.

YOU DESERVE THIS FOR THE DAMAGE.

LITTLE JOE

"That's what folks call the road agent who's been holdin' up the Cactus stage," Cap Maxwell explained quietly. "Nobody has ever got a look at his face, 'cause he wears a white hood that comes clear down to his shoulders. Since he's a small, slim hombre who don't talk much, Sheriff Walt Starns started callin' him Little Joe."

His blue eyes squinted thoughtfully, Wayne Morgan stared at the note a long time before he spoke. His interest in the white-hooded bandit was heightened now. The Masked Rider was being suspected for the stage hold-ups, and the Robin Hood outlaw's name had received enough ill-treatment. In addition, "Little Joe" had just taken a hand in the Diamond Cross war and Morgan knew it had not been without reason. Why had the bandit befriended Cap Maxwell? Was it a trick?

"Little Joe must have found better pickin's before he come here and started stealin' Shan Loring's moonstones," Morgan mused. Although Maxwell had told the cowboy about the unfortunate condition of his red-headed partner, Morgan had said nothing of the fight in the badlands. In addition to his other worries, the old rancher seemed sincerely grieved by Loring's failing mind, as if he were partially to blame for that, too. News of Loring's attack on Wayne Morgan would only grieve him more, make him feel it was his duty to apologize for the red-headed giant's behavior.

"I think the gold came from that hombre that lent us a hand last night," Whit Berry declared. "The Masked Rider. I can't see Little Joe helpin' anybody connected with the Weepin' Woman!"

DISAGREEING with this line of speculation, Morgan told the foreman he had always heard the Robin Hood outlaw was more generous with guns and fists than he was with money.

"It seems to me that Little Joe is gettin' gold from somewhere, and the Masked Rider is gettin' the blame!"

Over a warm meal which Cap Maxwell prepared himself in the kitchen at the back of the house, Wayne Morgan encouraged a further exchange of views

about the situation at the Diamond Cross. Already, his mind was working over the facts he had obtained and the diffident, hang-dog expressions of Whit Berry and the old rancher made him eager to start work on the vague suspicions the information had aroused in his agile brain.

Though he had not admitted as much when they were discussing wages, the only reward Wayne Morgan sought here was to ease the mental burdens of these two men whom he had quickly grown to like and admire. His happiness came from giving peace to others, and in thwarting the lawlessness and oppression which constantly sought to choke progress from the great surging frontier that was his first love.

Happiness could never come to the Diamond Cross again until Whit Berry was reunited with Velma Sloan, or had learned her true fate, and Cap Maxwell was left free to clear his honest name of the obstacles which now obscured it. The importance of this task was emphasized every time Wayne Morgan looked at Maxwell's fast-aging face and at the sadness and exhaustion in Whit Berry's gray eyes.

Still pondering the identity of the bandit called Little Joe, Morgan asked the rancher many questions about the various men who had invested money in the Weeping Woman Mine. He was surprised to learn that most of the stockholders had long since left Moonstone Valley, but that Maxwell still mailed them checks whenever he could raise sufficient money. The herd which had been scattered by the fire would have ended his obligation to these men, and the nearness of his goal made the loss doubly infuriating. The rancher had left the cattle untended for a year, allowing them to wander and fatten while he looked forward to the day they would pay him out of debt.

"You mean you hadn't been up to that end of the valley in a year?" Morgan queried, sensing a vague significance in this fact.

Maxwell nodded. "Drove 'em up there and left 'em last summer, long before Grady Sloan and Thad Tate was killed. I never get around that cussed mine unless I have to; never want to look at it and think what a fool I was!"

When the meal was finished, Morgan asked the rancher to assign any chores to

him that needed to be done. Maxwell explained that his chief worry was to gather cattle for shipping. He said that Whit Berry had done all he could, and that Morgan could now have a fling at hiring a roundup crew who would be willing to wait for their wages until the ranch was put on paying basis again. Since much of the day was gone, he told Morgan to catch up on odd jobs around the ranch that afternoon. Tomorrow he could ride into Cactus in search for men.

At any other time, Whit Berry might have resented being replaced by a newcomer. But he liked Wayne Morgan, had recognized the strength and ability in the quiet-spoken man, and was sincerely hoping that his presence would change the luck of the Diamond Cross. Besides, Whit Berry's thoughts were not of cattle and ranching now, and had not been for months. Until Velma Sloan was in his arms again, his real interest would be only in searching for her.

Leaving Cap Maxwell pacing restlessly around the house, Morgan walked with Whit Berry toward the bunkhouse. The tall foreman moved with a listless gait, his eyes staring unseeingly at the ground. Knots of muscle played along the square rim of his jaw, and Morgan was aware of his thoughts even before the man spoke.

Berry glanced decisively at the horses in the corral, and then raised his eyes to the green hills beyond.

"I'm ridin' out, Morgan," he said quietly. "With you here to keep tab on the old man, it'll give me a chance to do some lookin'."

"For Velma?"

Berry nodded. "I'm takin' a ride back up into the rocks. That end of the valley is the only place anybody could hide a girl or—a body this long without it bein' found. I'll be back by midnight."

"What if yuh ain't?" Morgan asked. "Then it won't be my fault."

CONSCIOUS that they both shared the thought that death and danger still bided its time in the region where the fire had started, Morgan met the foreman's steady glance in understanding. No threat to his life could stop Whit Berry's quest, and Morgan would have felt the same in the man's place. As Whit turned toward the corral, Morgan moved on a few

CHAPTER VIII

Manhunt

paces to the steps of the bunkhouse where Berry had left his warbag.

As the dark-haired cowboy bent to lift his pack, his glance was focused on the sheltered nook made by the joining of the steps to the wall of the building. The discovery he made then was not entirely accidental, for he had not forgotten that this was where Little Joe had left the pouch of gold for Cap Maxwell.

Leaving the warbag in place, he stooped and picked up the glistening round rock which had caught his eye. It was a moonstone. The clue for which his eyes had been searching since he walked into the yard was now in his hand. This far away from its native ground, the moonstone could have got there in only one way. Little Joe, the bandit, had accidentally dropped it.

After a short debate with himself, Morgan walked to the corral where Whit Berry was saddling a long legged dun horse.

He showed Berry the stone, explained where he had found it, but the foreman showed little interest.

"Anybody that rides up that way usually brings back one or two as a good-luck charm," Berry said nonchalantly as he led his mount outside and stepped into saddle. "Yuh may have somethin' and yuh may not. I don't think you'll find Little Joe with it, and if yuh do it won't help us much. It ain't him that's after Cap Maxwell."

With a wave of his hand, Berry swung the horse around and galloped away. Regardless of its value, the moonstone reminded Morgan of wild-eyed Shan Loring. He started to call to Whit Berry, inform him that the red-headed giant was on the prowl in the badlands and in a dangerous mood. But Whit was already out of hearing, spurring toward the hills.

Glancing again at the opalescent rock, the dark-haired waddy held it close to his eyes then for another inspection. One corner of the stone held a faint golden tinge, as if it had been rubbed against the yellow metal and collected dust in its pores. He was positive that Whit Berry had underestimated the value of this rough jewel. As he went on into the bunkhouse, the icy glimmer that many men had seen in the eyes of the Masked Rider had frozen in Wayne Morgan's eyes.



Y DUSK Wayne Morgan had done more work than an ordinary forty-a-month puncher would do in a full day. He had forked down enough hay into the barn stalls to last a week, tightened some sagging poles on the far side of the corral, and repaired all the broken harness in the supply room. He was getting a broken-down buckboard in shape to be used as a chuckwagon when Cap Maxwell came out from the house to call him to supper.

Two things had happened during the afternoon to give the old rancher's spirit a needed boost. One of them was Morgan's initiative, for the optimism with which the dark-haired waddy readied things for another roundup reminded Maxwell of happier days. The other was the fact that his Chinese cook, who had left the house when Maxwell went on roundup duty, had returned. Like all other men of the outdoors, Cap Maxwell had a strong prejudice against doing any kind of work inside.

Morgan was washing up at the bunkhouse pump when he heard the thump of running hoofs and turned to find Cap Maxwell beside him, staring curiously into the blue twilight. A rider came into view in the level pasture east of the house and galloped into the ranch yard a few seconds later. The horseman started toward the house, but swerved to the bunkhouse when he saw the two men standing in the shadows there.

The star pinned over the left pocket of the big iron-jawed man's fat-padded wool vest identified him as Sheriff Walt Starns. Wayne Morgan studied him with casual interest, failing to see the type of man he had expected.

Starns was all body and no limbs. His small, egg-shaped head looked as if it had been added to his great hulking torso as an afterthought and rolled around like it might fall off when he talked. His voice, tired after the struggle from his fat-wrinkled neck to his small, thin-lipped mouth, was a hoarse wheeze. To compensate for the shortness of his stubby arms,

the sheriff's two guns were belted high on his broad hips with the butts turned forward. Despite his size, there would be nothing awkward about the way Starns handled those guns, Morgan decided.

"Howdy, Walt," Cap Maxwell said. "On business?"

Walt Starns' reply was delayed by a grinding, rattling cough which he made no attempt to muffle with his hand.

"That's right," he growled at last. "Little Joe pulled another stage raid yesterday about dusk, and made off with two boxes of Shan Loring's stones. Like always he didn't touch the mail or nothin'."

Unconsciously, Cap Maxwell's gnarled right hand slipped into the pocket of his square-tailed black coat. Morgan knew the pouch of gold was there, and Maxwell's expression indicated that he meant to mention the bandit's visit to the Diamond Cross. For reasons of his own, Morgan did not believe it would be a wise move, and he spoke before Maxwell could reply.

"This ain't no camp for outlaws, Sheriff," Morgan said evenly. "That why yuh come?"

The big, pink-faced lawman coughed again, changed the subject long enough to learn Morgan's name. Maxwell introduced the dark-haired cowboy as the Diamond Cross' new *segundo*.

Starns' tiny black eyes swept over Morgan's tall muscular frame without comment, and he did not offer to shake hands.

"Shortly after this here hold-up," Starns went on as if there had been no interruption, "I understand yuh had a little trouble up in one of Moonstone Valley's hollers and the Masked Rider throwed in with yuh. It's my idea that he's either wearin' two disguises and robbin' the stage himself, or he's in cahoots with Little Joe. I'm after that Masked Rider gent, Maxwell, and yuh better talk fast if yuh know where's he's hidin' out at."

Relief showed momentarily in Maxwell's face, and then his flat cheeks glowed with anger and scorn. "Reckon Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps has drifted into Cactus by now and are shootin' off their mouths. He was too much for them to handle, and I reckon they'd like to see him caught. Or it is Milo Trapp who's pushin' yuh out this way?"

THE chuckle which started in Starns' chest terminated in the habitual grinding cough.

"Huh!" he snorted. "Milo Trapp don't care how many times his stages are robbed as long as it's hurtin' Shan Lorin' and not him. He don't want me to catch Little Joe. He'd rather pore Shan had to go hungry."

"Then why are you doin' it?" Wayne Morgan asked softly.

Walt Starns twisted toward the dark-haired waddy and tried to raise his head to an indignant height on its short neck.

"It's my duty! That's why."

A tight grin pulled at the cowboy's lips. "Seems to me you'd be just as interested in the gents that tried to burn Cap and his cattle alive as yuh would some hombre who stole a few blue rocks. Not to mention a couple of unsolved murders I've heard about and the whereabouts of a young girl who's been missing for months!"

Starns' slitted black eyes tried to bury themselves in rolls of fat as he eyed Morgan with fury.

"You keep out of this, mister, before I lock yuh up as a suspicious character," he snapped. "I don't like the way yuh take up for them owlhooters! I figger when I catch the Masked Rider I'll put an end to the whole she-bang. Any man that'll steal from a pore addle-pated prospector like Shan Loring is a yaller dog in my book."

"And any one who shoots in the back like the one who killed Tate is a yaller dog in mine," Morgan countered. "And speakin' of owlhooters, I might look yuh up tomorrow and talk some more about that. There's a couple gents on this range who interest me."

Starns' pink face grew pinker as his anger continued to leap and burn. He picked up the reins and kneed his horse around to leave.

"Mind yore own business and yuh'll live longer, Morgan," he snarled.

His hacking cough drifted along behind him as he galloped out of the yard with the saddle creaking under his weight.

"Yuh shouldn't have stirred him up that way, son," Cap Maxwell said quietly. "I don't know Starns much. He come here three years ago with money enough to buy the votes that elected him. But I

know he's always suspicious of a gent after he gets riled at him."

Morgan chuckled. "Then we'll be even, Cap. It don't strike me just right the way Starns wants to recover them moonstones."

"I think I can see through that," the rancher ventured. "Milo Trapp owns the stage line, and Starns don't like him. Milo opposed Starns in the sheriff's race. Trapp lost money in our mine, and will admit he'd like to see me and Shan Loring beggin' like hound dogs. He won't get no protection for his drivers, refuses to let the law ride in his coaches. Since Trapp don't want to catch Little Joe it makes Walt Starns try that much harder. But Milo Trapp is a hard man to buck."

"You sound like you've had trouble with Trapp," Morgan guessed.

"I'm havin' it now. When I promised to stand good for every dollar invested in the mine, Milo Trapp wanted it put in writin'. I signed ten thousand dollars worth of notes for him, two thousand in each note. The rest of the stockholders let me pay 'em when I can, but Trapp is after me every time a note is due. There's one due now, and I've been lookin' to hear from him all day. That's why I need a market herd so bad. You'd think a man with as much land and money as he's got would go a little easy."

"That's the kind who always wants more," Morgan declared. The hate and greed of Milo Trapp stirred up new thoughts of suspicion about the Moonstone Valley killer in Morgan's mind.

He followed the old rancher into the house after a while, but they talked little during the meal. Maxwell had not asked about Whit Berry, for the young foreman's absence had become a custom. But Morgan noticed that the rancher looked several times toward the window which faced the dark hills, and the cowboy's thoughts also traveled that way. . . .

In spite of Cap Maxwell's urgent plea that he sleep near him, Wayne Morgan insisted on spending the night at the bunkhouse. He sympathized with the old rancher's desire for companionship and protection, for there seemed to be no end to Maxwell's unrest.

WHEN Morgan left the ranchhouse, Maxwell was sitting in his chair

looking glumly at a letter which had arrived at the Diamond Cross shortly after supper. A skinny, bald-headed rider from the Rocking T Ranch had delivered the message. It was from Milo Trapp, and stated that the man would file a lien against the Diamond Cross unless Maxwell paid the note, which was now due, by the next day.

With trouble pressing in on him from all sides, the dark-haired cowboy knew Cap Maxwell's life was becoming almost unbearable. If Morgan was to help the man, he would have to act swiftly, and it was this thought that made him desert the rancher tonight.

In one day at the Diamond Cross, Wayne Morgan had learned much about the persecution the rancher had been forced to endure, but there were still many unanswered questions in his mind. He had sent Blue Hawk to Cactus in the hope of learning more facts, and he was expecting a report from the Yaqui soon. By sleeping in the bunkhouse, Morgan would make it much simpler for them to meet and talk without arousing Maxwell's suspicion.

Morgan had little intention of wasting the entire night in slumber, so he did not enter the long, low-roofed building behind the main house immediately. He sat down on the darkened steps for a while, his gaze fixed thoughtfully on Maxwell's lighted window. While he waited, he could easily imagine the torturing thoughts that were coursing through Maxwell's mind at that moment, could picture him sitting alone in the big house rocking solemnly back and forth in his chair, trying vainly to find a solution to his countless worries.

Morgan's mind was busy, too, but he was viewing Maxwell's plight in a different light. The things he had learned here had completely reversed his original conclusions. He was convinced now that a fear of vengeance had completely blinded Cap Maxwell to the real danger in Moonstone Valley. The mysterious killer who had claimed the lives of Thad Tate and Grady Sloan was playing for greater stakes than the mere satisfaction of avenging the loss of a few dollars invested in a worthless gold mine. Vengeance was swift and decisive, usually governed more by passion than by cleverness.

Such was not the case in this particular

instance. Tate and Sloan had died three months ago near the Weeping Woman Mine. Cap Maxwell and Shan Loring, the other two partners were still alive. The only threat to Maxwell's life had been the fire in the hollow last night, and it had come on the rancher's first visit to the mine's locality. Today, Wayne Morgan had passed near the deserted gold claim and the wild-eyed miner, Shan Loring, had tried to kill him, babbling baseless accusations against the dark-haired cowboy. Was the Weeping Woman Mine an accursed territory, or was there some other reason for the disaster that struck all who came near it?

Morgan was certain that the solution to one mystery in Moonstone Valley would shed light on the others. If he could learn the reason for Little Joe's help to the Diamond Cross, it would also help to identify the white-hooded bandit. With Little Joe's identity established, he might be able to learn why the bandit insisted on stealing Shan Loring's moonstones, and perhaps uncover the leader of the entire plot which was smothering the Diamond Cross with sorrow and unhappiness.

The answer to all these things might eventually leave a clue to the disappearance of Velma Sloan. At least Wayne Morgan was positive that there was a connection between each incident, and that Cap Maxwell and Whit Berry could find no peace here until every circumstance had been pursued and revealed for its true purpose.

Morgan sat on the steps until he saw the light disappear from the ranchhouse living room, and then reappear at the corner window of the adobe building. Cap Maxwell had at last decided to seek refuge from his burdens by sleep, and as the man started moving around the bedroom, Morgan arose and entered the dark bunkhouse. There was yet no sign of Blue Hawk, and he decided to stretch out and get some rest before the Yaqui arrived. But, as he had already surmised, there was to be no rest for Wayne Morgan tonight.

HE HAD just turned his back when a shot came. The first sound was the whistle of the slug and the tinkle of falling glass, and then came the flat slap of an exploding rifle. It took Morgan a mo-

ment to realize that the bullet had not entered the bunkhouse, and then he heard Cap Maxwell's startled yell.

Whirling, Morgan leaped past the steps and landed with legs widespread in the dirt of the yard. The two black Colts had leaped to his hands while he was still in the air, and now he swung a piercing glance around the shadow-tinted ranch buildings. A glance showed him the broken window in Cap Maxwell's bedroom. The light was still burning, the drawn shade swaying slightly from the feathery breeze that was part of Arizona nights. He saw Cap Maxwell's short, stocky silhouette move across the room, and then the old rancher wisely put out the light.

Relieved to see the rancher still on his feet, Morgan made no move toward the house. Instead, he stayed intently still, his gaze sweeping every corner of the yard, his thumbs holding the cocked hammers of his twin guns. Suddenly, a shadow moved out from a chokeberry shrub thirty yards away and crept toward the gloomy base of a thick-limbed aspen where Morgan knew a horse would be waiting.

It was the sight Morgan had hoped to see. Holding his fire, the dark-haired waddy sprinted rapidly forward, running as quietly as possible to shorten the range. He had traveled less than ten yards when the rifleman saw him coming, and broke into a run toward the aspen. Morgan knew he would never reach the horse in time to stop the drygulcher, but he was close enough for an accurate shot.

Stopping for a steady aim, Morgan released the cocked hammer of his right-hand gun. A scarlet streak leaped through the night, shooting straight toward the extended right leg of the running man. It was a spot Morgan had chosen deliberately, for he wanted to stop the man without killing him. At first he thought he was successful. Just as the cowboy had expected, the leg buckled and the man went down. With a bullet through his calf, no ordinary man was going to get up and run again. But the drygulcher was no ordinary man. He was hardly on the ground before he was up again, moving with as much speed and determination as before.

For a second the shadow of the aspen swallowed him, and Morgan's next two shots clipped twigs and leaves from the

dark tree. Then presently the drum of running hoofs signified the rifleman's swift departure, and Morgan knew pursuit would be useless by the time he roped and saddled his own horse.

He turned back toward the house in deeper sympathy with Cap Maxwell because of the incredible happenings that had brought fear into the old man's life. For Wayne Morgan had just shot a man through the leg; he could not miss at that distance, and he had seen the man fall. Still the rifleman had leaped up and run on without so much as a limp!

"Did yuh get him, Morgan?" Cap Maxwell ran across the yard, his gray-streaked brown hair tousled and his unbuttoned clothes flapping with his stiff-gaited trot.

MORGAN shook his head, noticing that Maxwell had escaped unharmed. "Missed him clean, Cap. But I'll never know how come!"

Maxwell stuffed his shirt-tail into his moleskin pants and stared uneasily in the direction the rifleman had taken.

"Hard shootin' on a night dark as this. I'm shore glad I hired yuh, Morgan. Looks like they're still after me."

The dark-haired cowboy nodded, glancing thoughtfully at the plain white envelope which protruded from Maxwell's shirt pocket. He recognized it as the letter the rancher had received right after supper that night, and it started a new thought through his groping mind.

"Milo Trapp ever try to buy yuh out here, Cap?"

"Shore," Maxwell replied. "Ever since things started gettin' so hard for me, Milo's been offerin' to give me a few thousand for the Diamond Cross, tear up his notes and pay off the mortgage and call it even. That's one reason he pushes me on them notes so hard. He figgers I'll finally give up."

"That's what I thought," Morgan said softly.

"Saints alive, Morgan! Yuh don't think it's Milo Trapp behind this thing?"

Turning, Morgan started walking back

toward the house with the ranch owner, shaking his head dubiously. "I have an idee it could be a lot of folks, Cap. Yuh admit Trapp didn't like it 'cause he lost his money, even if yuh are tryin' to pay him back. Then there's yore own foreman, Whit Berry. He stays gone a lot, and ain't no way of knowin' exactly what he's doin'. Even Velma Sloan could be layin' low and callin' the play. Only thing, she wouldn't kill her own father. I'm remainin' suspicious of a lot of folks, Cap, until I tag the real killer! And I'm shore hankerin' to meet this Milo Trapp gent in person. That shot wasn't aimed to hit you. It went through the upper half of the window, and any man wantin' to kill would have aimed to the lower sash. It was meant to scare you, Cap—mebbe scare yuh enough to sell the Diamond Cross."

"Well, you'll get a chance to meet Trapp tomorrow, I reckon. I've figured out a way to pay him that note. Use the gold that Little Joe left me. Trick or no trick, I've got to do it. I aim to let you take it in to Trapp."

After promising Maxwell that he would remain alert for any more prowlers, Morgan urged the old man to return to the house and go to bed. The rancher was not eager to follow the suggestion, but the quiet, determined way in which Morgan planted himself again on the bunkhouse steps, his worn Colt in his lap, gave the man courage and he soon relented. But it was nearly an hour before Morgan noticed that the light was out and all was still at the house.

Apparently, Wayne Morgan was not the only person who had been watching the Diamond Cross headquarters for an indication of sleep, for it was not long after the place was still before the keen wail of a mountain lion drifted down from the round knoll a short distance behind the barn. Walking swiftly that way, the cowboy stopped in the shadows, cupped his hands to his mouth, and imitated the signal. His voice was muted in such a way as to make it sound too distant to arouse Cap Maxwell, but sensitive ears received the answer.

In less than ten minutes Blue Hawk, the Yaqui Indian, was drifting out of the darkness on moccasined feet and coming hurriedly toward the barn.

NEXT ISSUE

RETRIBUTION RANGE

A Masked Rider Novel

By GUNNISON STEELE

CHAPTER IX

Owlhoot Haven

QFTEN Blue Hawk's keen eyes could probe deeply into men's thoughts and a look at Wayne Morgan's set face brought a scowl to the Indian's bronzed features.

"There has been trouble here, Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly as he slipped up beside the cowboy.

Morgan nodded. They hunkered down close to the protecting walls of the round-roofed barn and talked in low tones for several minutes. Morgan told the Indian all that he had learned in a day at the Diamond Cross, and Blue Hawk listened closely so that he, too, could ponder the answers to the mysterious happenings in Moonstone Valley. The small blue bruise on Morgan's jaw caught the Yaqui's attention, and he quickly inquired about it.

"The loco one, Shan Loring, put that there," Morgan replied, explaining about the fight in the badlands.

Blue Hawk glanced speculatively toward the hills. "Perhaps his twisted sight will also see Whit Berry as a killer. You said the foreman planned to return at midnight. It is past that hour, Senor, and Whit Berry is not near. And there is no time for you to search for him. I think you will want to ride elsewhere."

As Morgan frowned questioningly, Blue Hawk told him hurriedly of the things he had learned in Cactus that day. Like the Masked Rider, Blue Hawk was also adept at the art of disguise. When seeking information, the Yaqui often appeared in town with an old blanket draped across his shoulders and a floppy sombrero pulled low over his face. In this way he appeared as any wandering redskin, and could move about without being suspected as the intelligent accomplice of the Robin Hood outlaw.

Blue Hawk had spent the entire day in the little settlement of Cactus, moving from one shaded awning to another and keeping his ear tuned inconspicuously to several conversations. Remembering the Masked Rider's suspicions about Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps, the Yaqui had ambled by the jail several times to study

the reward dodgers which usually dotted the walls of any frontier sheriff's office. It was then that he made a startling discovery. Nowhere in the town of Cactus was there a single reward poster!

Knowing that new advertisements for "wanted" men were often mailed out on the first of the month, Blue Hawk had remained close to Sheriff Walt Starns' office when the day's mail was delivered. Shortly afterward he found the answer to the peculiar absence of bounty offers in Cactus.

"Senor Starns went into the alley with much useless mail to burn," Blue Hawk explained. "I remained hidden behind a rain barrel while he lighted the papers with a match and walked away. There was time for me to salvage one poster from the fire, Senor," Blue Hawk concluded.

From the pocket of his cavalry shirt, the Indian took a scorched piece of paper and handed it to the dark-haired cowboy. The edges were ragged and brown-stained, but there was enough of it left for Morgan to realize the value of Blue Hawk's work. For, staring out at him from the tattered parchment was the square, heavy-browed face of Hobe Venter! There was sufficient printed matter left intact on the poster to reveal that Hobe Venter was worth one thousand dollars to the man who turned him over to the proper authorities.

"That's a strange thing," Morgan mused. "A sheriff overlookin' a man wanted for murder. No honest lawman is goin' to do that. And there were other posters that were burned, Hawk. That means Walt Starns is protectin' more than one outlaw for some reason. Instead of one man bein' after the Weepin' Woman Mine owners, there must be a whole gang. And I got a hunch I know who's behind it!"

"Perhaps," Blue Hawk ventured, "he overlooks the record because he needs Venter's help. The sheriff has hired Venter and Stacy Lipps to go with the midnight stage from Cactus. They have arranged a trap for Little Joe, and they mean to kill the bandit without a chance to surrender."

MORGAN understood now why Blue Hawk had said there would be no time to search for Whit Berry. Since he had found the moonstone by the bunkhouse steps, he had become convinced that

the white-hooded bandit would be of valuable assistance in solving the mystery which had started a reign of terror in Moonstone Valley. The bandit could be no help dead, and Morgan did not mean to let him be killed without a chance to defend himself. Remembering the help offered Cap Maxwell by the road-agent, Morgan made a quick decision.

"I don't think there'll be any more trouble here before daylight, Hawk," Morgan said hurriedly. "You head into the badlands and see if yuh can find out what happened to Whit Berry. I don't want anything to happen to Little Joe until I get a chance to talk with that bandit."

Questioning Blue Hawk until he had every detail of the ambush planned by Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps, Morgan hastily saddled the hammerhead roan and led it out of the yard so Cap Maxwell would not hear him leave.

"You will have to hurry, Senor," Blue Hawk warned as he moved back toward his waiting horse. "The stage has already left Cactus with a load of Shan Loring's moonstones, and the sheriff thinks Little Joe will stop it in the cut where the trail crosses the rim of the valley. It has been held up there before."

His heart beating faster with the anticipation of action, Wayne Morgan waved to the Yaqui and rolled his blunted spurs over the roan's flanks. The speedy horse stretched immediately into a long gallop and Morgan was across the level prairie by the time Blue Hawk turned toward the arid wastes of Moonstone Valley.

As soon as he was in the hills, the dark-haired cowboy swung southeast to cut into the stage road where it curved close toward the Diamond Cross range before climbing out of the valley in the direction of Phoenix and other distant terminals.

Blue Hawk's report had verified Cap Maxwell's explanation of the strange antagonism between Milo Trapp, owner of the stage line, and Sheriff Walt Starns. Though Trapp continued to refuse an armed guard with his coaches, Sheriff Starns had finally hit upon a way to have his men on the scene when Little Joe appeared.

While the stage was still in the barn, Lipps and Venter were to hide under the tarpaulin which covered the baggage rack on top of the vehicle. Since few passengers

rode the midnight trip, and Shan Loring's moonstones had been stored there earlier, there was little chance of the concealed men being discovered when the stage left Cactus. It was a clever plan, sure death for Little Joe!

Within an hour, Morgan came out of the brushy undergrowth and spurred the roan up a bare, rocky knoll that formed one of the stepping stones to the rim of Moonstone Valley. He pulled up on the crest of the hill to give his lathered mount a rest, and then he saw there was not time for deliberation. Directly below him was the slow-moving hulk of the Cactus stage.

The rocking vehicle had already started its ascent around the hillside beyond, and Morgan could make out the notched gap a hundred yards ahead where the narrow wagon road passed between two rock walls which had been cut down to lower the sharp grade over the mountains.

Shifting the twin holsters forward to a more convenient position, Morgan urged the roan forward again. He came off the hill at a reckless gallop, leaning low in the saddle while the wind whipped the brim of his Stetson away from his rugged brown face. Like a thundering avalanche, he pounded down into the hollow between the two ridges and sent the roan scraping and pawing its way up the slope toward the slanting stage road. Fast as he had traveled, the dark-haired cowboy barely made it in time.

A shot thundered with startling echoes from the dark stillness of the cut just as Wayne Morgan reached the trail fifty feet behind the moving stage. He kept going, spurring in closer as the scrawny, meek-faced jehu hauled back on the reins and stopped the skittish horses. Milo Trapp had chosen his man well. The bearded driver made no move to resist, and Morgan could hear him chattering nervously to some unseen person.

THEN Morgan was close enough to see around the curve to the front of the coach. Silently, he brought the tired roan to a halt and sat tensely in the saddle as he got his first look at Little Joe.

A lithe, wasp-waisted figure had appeared in the trail directly in front of the stage, seated gracefully in the saddle of a spirited mustang. The only part of the bandit's dress which Morgan could see

clearly was the worn cowboy levis rolled above small, tooled riding boots. Over Little Joe's head and shoulders flowed a white hood of some finely-woven material that had a faint sheen despite the darkness. The lower edge of the hood was frayed and uneven, as if a seam had been ripped there or some trimming removed. The rifle, still curling smoke from its blued barrel, was aimed at the bearded driver's chest, and the bandit made a silent gesture with its threatening bore.

"I-I know what yuh want, Little Joe," the driver stammered. "The—the moonstones ore on top. I'll have to get 'em for yuh. There—there ain't no use to get reckless, 'cause Milo Trapp don't care how much yuh steal from Shan—"

"Look out, Little Joe! It's a trap!" Wayne Morgan had taken his eyes away from the bandit just in time to see the movement of the rumpled canvas on top of the coach. His cry of warning rose above the driver's stammering surrender, changing his whining tones into a howl of terrified surprise.

As he called out loudly, Morgan was already on the move. For the burly, sloping shoulders of Hobe Venter had slipped into view, and Stacy Lipps was shoving up beside him. Both men were swinging cocked rifles toward the front of the coach when Wayne Morgan's roan reached the rear of the vehicle.

Yelling to attract the men's attention, Morgan left the saddle in a springing leap. Before Venter and Lipps could collect their wits, the husky cowboy had caught hold of the baggage railing and swung up beside them.

The gunmen forgot Little Joe as they gawked in surprise at the grim-faced stranger who had come from nowhere and was lunging angrily toward them. Hobe Venter got out a strangled curse, tried to swing the rifle around to fire. The gun exploded, but it was too close and crowded for long guns now, and the slug burrowed harmlessly through the ceiling of the empty coach. Morgan did not give the man time to fire again. His right fist was already on its way, and the crack of it against Venter's chin seemed a part of the gunshot.

The burly outlaw toppled back on the narrow footing, bumping into stringy Stacy Lipps and staggering him. Alert to

every advantage, Wayne Morgan centered his attention on Lipps. Venter was down, and Lipps was already overbalanced. Like twin pistons, Morgan's arms pumped back and forth. He hit Lipps first in the middle, and then on the point of his slim chin. The stringy gunman was hardly in the fight before he was out of it. Morgan's second blow lifted him over the edge of the baggage rack and flung him outward into space. He landed with a solid thump on the rocky trail, and lay still as the fall knocked the wind out of him.

Lipps' swift defeat left more room on top of the rocking stage, and Hobe Venter used the space to launch a dive at Wayne Morgan's braced legs. The burly man's hunched shoulders smacked into the cowboy like a thrown spear as Venter reared up from the baggage rack. Morgan staggered, tried to catch his balance; but Venter's weight was too much for him. He fell hard, his shoulders hanging over the side of the stage coach as Venter piled on top of him. The gunman's boots scraped noisily as he tried to shove Morgan to the ground, but the cowboy grabbed the ribbed floor of the rack and held on.

STAYING out of Morgan's reach, Venter jabbed his elbow into the cowboy's ribs, trying for a knockout blow. As sharp pain knifed into his lungs, Morgan squirmed aside and rocked over on his back. Venter dived again then, his taloned fingers hunting for the cowboy's throat. That move proved to be Venter's own mistake. Morgan's upraised feet caught Venter just above his crossed gunbelts. The burly outlaw completed his dive, but in a different way. As Morgan straightened his legs in a springy, heaving motion, Venter slid over the cowboy's head and went tumbling down the slope behind the stage.

Straightening, Morgan leaped to the ground beside the man. Venter got up slow and then went down fast, his nose spurting blood as the cowboy's fist smashed him to the rutted trail.

Breathing hard, Morgan picked up the trailing reins of his waiting horse and walked back to the front of the coach. The short, scrawny driver was squatted down in the wagon boot, peering cautiously back toward the sprawled figures of Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps. There was no sign of the hooded bandit and the gloomy

cut was oddly silent in contrast to the booming shots and scuffling feet of a few minutes before.

"Where's Little Joe?" Morgan asked between breaths. "He get what he come for?"

The jehu stood up and rubbed a grimy bandana over his perspiring face. "He high-tailed soon as the fight started. Didn't say another word. Just turned and skeedaddled. Honest, mister, I didn't know them two hombres was up there. If Milo Trapp knowed they stowed away on one his coaches, he'd raise Cain!"

"Forget it," Morgan cut in, amused by the driver's excuse for the lack of the bandit's success. "I ain't one of Little Joe's pards. Fact is, I aim to try to pick up his trail and bring him in!"

CHAPTER X

The Weeping Woman



WHILE the unnerved stage driver continued to mumble about the hooded bandit and his own misfortunes, Wayne Morgan swung back to the top of the stalled coach. Two small wooden boxes were lashed to the forward section of the baggage rack, both

addressed to a Mr. Arthur Lee, in Kansas City.

Knowing they held Shan Loring's moonstone shipment, the dark-haired cowboy quickly ripped the top from one of the crates. Ignoring the curious glances from the bearded jehu, he dug down inside the box and withdrew several small canvas pouches. He opened them one at a time, running his hand experimentally over the inside of each bag. Shan Loring's shipment was just as it appeared on the address label. The wooden crates contained nothing but the round, shiny flat rocks like those carried by the redhead when the Masked Rider had met him during the stampede.

Disappointment showed briefly in the cowboy's face as he slid back to the ground and mounted the hammerhead roan. Then he glanced at the driver's disgruntled face and chuckled softly before he whirled and rode away.

Working his way to the rim of the

valley, Morgan had no trouble in picking up Little Joe's trail. Even in the darkness he could see an occasional scarred rock or broken bush, for the bandit's retreat had been too swift to be deceptive. Travel was less difficult on the higher levels, and Morgan kept the roan in a steady jog as he worked northward, stopping now and then to check his course for new sign.

Little Joe had followed a worn path through the brush and rocks, but after riding steadily for over an hour Morgan realized the worst was yet to come. The trail dipped abruptly down over a sloping rock shelf and entered the protective badlands near the Weeping Woman Mine.

Under the pale light of a few scattered stars, Moonstone Valley looked even more impassable than in daylight. A thousand black shadows crawled and twisted over its floor, marking the depths of gulches and canyons where the stars did not penetrate. Here and there a smooth granite spire or eroded rock turret jutted above the unlighted blackness, looming like headstones in a graveyard.

Giving up all attempt at following sign, the cowboy edged the roan down the steep ledge and hurried through a narrow arroyo that led him out into a wider gulch. A hundred yards away he could discern the conical piles of waste ore that had been dug from the deserted gold mine, and he knew the tunnel was only a few steps from those rocks. Off to his right was a lone cottonwood tree, and a few scattered bushes waved dark branches around its base where Nugget Creek flowed briefly through the wasteland.

Morgan stopped the roan and stared thoughtfully at the creek for while, his senses tuned for any sound or sight that would put him on Little Joe's trail again. But all was quiet around the Weeping Woman Mine.

Then suddenly the stillness was shattered by the high, thin wail of a mountain lion. Morgan was instantly alert, remembering that Blue Hawk had ridden into this same territory in search of Whit Berry. Reining the roan southward, Morgan rode swiftly toward the source of the sound.

Blue Hawk appeared soundlessly from the shadow of an upthrust slab of rock. The Yaqui was on foot, leading the gray quietly behind him. It took Morgan only

a second to see the reason for Blue Hawk's choice. Whit Berry was in the gray's saddle, his lanky body draped face downward across the horse. The tall foreman's hat was gone, and his head was wrapped in the yellow neckerchief the man had worn when he left the Diamond Cross.

"There is death in Moonstone Valley tonight, Senor," Blue Hawk said seriously as he came close to the mounted cowboy.

"You mean Whit is dead?"

"No, Senor. He was lucky. I found him unconscious near the creek. A rifle bullet has grazed his skull, and the killer was still guarding his body, waiting for anyone who came for him."

THE Yaqui touched the ripped shoulder of his blue shirt, and Morgan could see the shallow bullet burn against Blue Hawk's tawny skin.

"The rifleman is hidden high in the rocks," Blue Hawk continued. "When I crept down to get the foreman, the rifleman fired two shots at me. I did not take time to fight with him, because I feared Senor Berry needed a doctor. I was taking him to Cactus when I saw you on the rim."

"Bueno, Hawk," Morgan replied. "Get him on to town and then hide out there yourself. I'm goin' to take a look around here and then go back to the ranch. Unless somethin' happens, I'll see you in Cactus in the mornin'."

He told Blue Hawk of his meeting with Little Joe and asked the Yaqui if he had seen the bandit enter the badlands.

"Once I thought I heard the sound of shod hoofs near here," the Yaqui answered, "but I was busy getting out of the rifleman's range and did not investigate."

After Blue Hawk had cut toward the valley rim to take a short-cut to the cowtown of Cactus, Morgan turned back toward the mine. He rode with more caution now, the picture of Whit Berry's wan face still fresh in his mind. The young foreman did not appear to be mortally injured, but it was no fault of the drygulcher. The hidden rifleman had aimed at Berry's brain, probably thought he had been successful in his attempt to kill.

When he came back to the gulch, the cowboy paused a moment in indecision, debating which route to follow. Since he

had seen the bandit face to face, Morgan was more eager than ever to talk with Little Joe. He still had in his pocket the moonstone dropped by the bandit in front of the bunkhouse, and he took it out and looked at it again. The faint golden tinge on one edge of the stone was still visible, and it was one of the things Morgan wanted the bandit to explain. He already had an idea how the gold had lodged there, but the bandit's word could turn Morgan's suspicions into definite proof. The moonstones he had seen atop the stagecoach shortly before had no such coloring.

Morgan was not risking his life in the menacing rocks for the mere satisfaction of curiosity, for he was not greatly interested in Shan Loring's loss. His chief thoughts were of an old gray-haired man at the Diamond Cross and the nightmarish worries which haunted that man's life. Somewhere in Moonstone Valley a merciless killer who had claimed the lives of two former partners of the Weeping Woman Mine still ran free.

Morgan was almost certain that he could identify that man now, but the proof against him would be so shallow that he might easily escape justice. Little Joe could greatly strengthen that proof, and provide the answer to another mystery as well, for Morgan now suspected the identity of the white-hooded bandit.

The cowboy's wandering thoughts were abruptly shifted by the metallic ring of an animal's shod hoof. The sound came from his left, and the dark-haired waddy whirled quickly toward cover. Drawing his righthand Colt, Morgan slid quietly to the ground and led his horse into the thick shadows cast by a nearby clump of saguaro cactus. The sound came nearer as Morgan hunkered low behind the giant thorny plants and peered tensely ahead.

A moment later he frowned in surprise as Shan Loring appeared around a turn and walked on past the cactus clump toward the deserted Weeping Woman Mine. The towering, wide-shouldered redhead was leading two pack mules behind him, empty surcingle's dangling loosely around the wiry bodies of the animals.

Loring was moving in a steady, purposeful stride, only his stringy red beard visible below the shadow of a flopping black sombrero. Morgan remained hidden until the giant miner was almost to the

creek. Then the cowboy left the roan near the cactus and moved out behind Loring.

SKIPPING from rock to rock, Morgan followed stealthily in the miner's tracks until Loring reached the creek. There the man stopped long enough to water the mules, and then he turned up the rock-strewn slope below the drift mouth of the Weeping Woman Mine. The watching cowboy did not move until the redhead had passed out of sight again.

With curiosity urging him on, Morgan ran swiftly up the slope, dropping cautiously to the ground as he reached the rough wagon road that had been graded along the front of the tunnel. When he was certain that Loring was not near, he stood up and hurried on.

A shiver of foreboding ran down his spine as he glanced at the entrance to the ill-fated mine. Heavy, sun-whitened timbers blocked the entrance now, the seal placed there by Cap Maxwell and his partners the day they admitted defeat in the mining venture. Shan Loring was not in sight, but Morgan was positive he had not entered the deserted tunnel. A look at the timbers was enough to reveal they had not been disturbed since the day they were put there.

It took Morgan only a few minutes to find the miner's trail again. In the soft soil of the graded road which had been built in the hope of freighting out rich ore to Cactus for shipment, Morgan soon picked out the faint impressions left by the tiny mule shoes.

Following the tracks eastward toward the valley rim, Morgan had gone less than a hundred yards when he again spied the hulking shadow of Shan Loring. The giant redhead was below him now, having left the wagon road and entered a narrow gulley that split the corner of the slope. There was more vegetation on this side of the slope, and Morgan had no trouble shortening the distance to his quarry.

He was twenty yards from Shan Loring when the man disappeared. The cowboy had stopped to let the miner get a safe distance away when Shan Loring suddenly faded from sight after walking into the shadows of a chokeberry thicket.

Refusing to believe his eyes, the cowboy stretched out on the dark ground and

continued to gaze at the thicket. While he waited the eeriness of the land about him was sharply impressed on his mind.

A hundred feet above him was the deserted, boarded-up mine which had claimed the fortunes and lives of men. Somewhere nearby was a road-agent who hid behind a renovated white hood and consistently stole shipments of the blue-white mineral stones that nature had scattered around the granite ledges of the valley.

Still stalking the shrouding shadows was a vigilant rifleman who had tried to kill Whit Berry and had burned a painful groove along Blue Hawk's left shoulder. And twenty yards in front of Wayne Morgan a bearded, wild-eyed prospector had faded into thin air. In addition to all this, the cowboy could not forget that he had shot a man in the leg tonight and the man had still been able to run, as if the deadly burn of a slug could do him no harm!

Though he could not keep such disconcerting memories completely stifled, Morgan still clung staunchly to practical thoughts. He did not believe in ghosts, and there was no room in his mind for superstition. Everything that had happened in Moonstone Valley had happened for a reason. Some motive greater than vengeance had been responsible for the death of Thad Tate and Grady Sloan, and Cap Maxwell's persecution had the same basis. Stemming from this same disaster, Morgan believed, was the disappearance of Velma Sloan. Even Little Joe, the bandit, had accepted a role in the Weeping Woman Mine drama, and Morgan was positive the road-agent had a vital part in the scheme which the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had uncovered here.

Morgan's faith in logic was reaffirmed presently, for Shan Loring parted the thick shrubs and came back into view. He had been gone about fifteen minutes, and now the two mules which he led back up the slope were loaded. Each of them had two small wooden crates roped on its back. Shan Loring's midnight journey through Moonstone Valley had apparently been made to prepare another shipment of moonstones.

AFTER the big miner had disappeared from sight above the crest of the gulley, Morgan left his hiding place and

walked quietly to the thicket where Loring had disappeared. He holstered his drawn gun and chuckled quietly when he saw the gaping mouth of a cave beyond the thick shrubs. Shan Loring had come and gone without suspecting that his moonstone cache had been revealed to Wayne Morgan.

His eyes lighting with suspicion, the cowboy started toward the opening. Then he stopped, his head cocked in a listening attitude. There were other sounds in Moonstone Valley now, and he could not tell whether they came from the distance or from the depths of the cave. But he was still aware that an unseen rifleman was nearby, and that he could very easily have plenty of help. The numerous reward posters burned by Sheriff Walt Starns indicated that more than one owlhooter had found refuge in the badlands.

Satisfied with what he had already learned, Morgan turned away and hurried back in the direction of his horse. He knew now how Little Joe obtained advance information about the moonstone shipments. Morgan had trailed the bandit into this area, and Little Joe probably paid close attention to Shan Loring's movements. The big miner was on his way to town now with a new load of moonstones and there would be another hold-up attempt on the first stage out. The next time, Morgan decided, it would be the Masked Rider who intercepted the white-hooded bandit.

A few minutes later the dark-haired cowboy found his horse just as he had left him, and swung wearily into saddle. There would be time for little sleep before he rode into Cactus tomorrow to pay in gold the note Milo Trapp was using as a new bankrupt threat against Cap Maxwell.

CHAPTER XI

The Bullet Hole



MID-AFTERNOON had arrived when Wayne Morgan rode into Cactus the next day. Lolling lazily in the saddle of the rested roan, the tall dark-haired cowboy looked as indolent and care-free as he had when he first arrived at the Diamond Cross

Ranch. But behind the cowboy's calm exterior there was keen calculation. A showdown with the Moonstone Valley killer was near, and Morgan needed to clear only one puzzling obstacle from his path before he made a play that would force the guilty man into the open. That obstacle was Milo Trapp.

Without asking any questions about his evident fatigue, Cap Maxwell had allowed Wayne Morgan to sleep undisturbed in the bunkhouse until noon. The old rancher thought Morgan's weariness was a result of standing guard in the ranchyard all night for he had not heard the dark-haired waddy leave the ranch nor had he seen him return from the badlands at dawn.

Maxwell might have allowed Morgan to sleep longer had not Whit Berry come riding into the ranch still weak and wan from the bullet wound in his head. The young foreman had received medical attention in Cactus, and had insisted on returning to the Diamond Cross when he found he was able to ride.

Berry's arrival aroused new excitement in the old rancher, and Maxwell hastened to awaken Wayne Morgan to hear the foreman's story. Whit Berry told of his rescue by the Masked Rider's Indian pard, and then explained how he had been hurt.

In his exploration of the badlands, Berry had seen a band of strange horsemen threading their way through the rocks near the Weeping Woman Mine. Thinking they might lead him to Velma Sloan, the young foreman had trailed them at a safe distance. He had lost sight of them for a few minutes, and then a rifle barked its deadly message from a nest of rocks in front of him. Afterward, Berry had remembered nothing until he regained consciousness on the outskirts of Cactus with Blue Hawk riding in the saddle behind him.

Cap Maxwell was both angered and encouraged by Whit Berry's report. The old rancher took a measure of hope from the knowledge that the Masked Rider was still in Moonstone Valley, but he was furious over the drygulch attempt on his foreman. Maxwell had insisted on looking up Sheriff Walt Starns and demanding that something be done about the threat of death that continued to hang over his ranch and all who worked for him. It had

taken Morgan nearly an hour to persuade the old rancher to remain at home. He finally won the argument after hinting that the Masked Rider was evidently still working to uncover the plot, pointing out that any rash move by the rancher might interfere with the Robin Hood rider's plans.

Wayne Morgan came into the twisting narrow street of Cactus from the east, his hat brim pulled low against the sun's burning rays. It was a small place, looking more like a temporary camp than a town. A dozen small, flat-roofed wooden shacks clustered at each end of the single street which curved in the middle to avoid two huge black boulders that sat boldly upright like a part of the town and dwarfed the puny structures beside them.

Farther on was the log-walled saloon, and across the street was a general store made of sun-dried adobe bricks. At the western end of the dusty thoroughfare, next door to a ramshackle livery barn, was another adobe building. The bars over the narrow windows identified it as the jail.

It was a town to which a man came to buy food or a drink and for nothing else. There were few horses at the weathered rails, and Morgan could see only one person in sight, a bearded oldster leaning beside the livery barn and whittling idly on a scrap of wood.

As Morgan pulled in at the saloon and stepped to the ground, he let his eyes rove over the faded signs on various windows and was undecided as to where he should look for Milo Trapp. The dim red letters on the livery barn said, TRAPP'S STAGE & FREIGHT LINE. There was also Trapp's Store, Trapp's Bar, and Trapp's Lunch. Morgan wondered how the town had managed to keep the name of Cactus amid such a pretentious display of ownership.

MAKING a guess, Morgan left the reins dangling and crossed to the adobe store building. As soon as he had adjusted his eyes to the gloom of the building's interior, the cowboy knew he had come to the right place.

He had heard enough about Milo Trapp to know him at first glance. Still in his early thirties, Trapp had stepped into one of the richest inheritances in the territory. His father had died five years before, and

Milo Trapp had come home from a lifetime of wandering to claim the spoils of the old man's long toil. His original heritage had been the Rocking T Ranch and the stage line, but Milo Trapp's ambition and desire for power and influence had rapidly enlarged his holdings. He owned the three other spreads that bordered Cap Maxwell's Diamond Cross, and his only failure had been in the Weeping Woman Mine. Trapp's determination for unblemished success made the loss difficult to forget.

The man who came out from behind a scarred counter to meet Wayne Morgan was dark-skinned and well-made. His deep black eyes were set under thin jet-black brows, his straight, prominent nose giving them the wide division that goes with intelligence. The stiff, erect bearing of his wide shoulders told of military training, and the dented scar left by a Sioux arrow puckered the man's left cheek. Until his father had died, Milo Trapp had spent his entire manhood in army service, and the mark of many battle campaigns was on his scarred, thick-fingered hands.

"You Milo Trapp?" Morgan asked quietly.

"You are correct, sir," Milo Trapp replied. His words were slow and precise, and his tight lower lip curled at one corner when he talked.

Morgan dug the heavy canvas pouch from his overall pocket, his eyes studying Milo Trapp from under the low brim of his Stetson. He let his glance drop to the man's polished boots, wondering if Trapp had scars that were more recent than the one left by the Sioux arrow. There was a small tear in the right leg of the man's serge trousers, marring his otherwise immaculate dress. The hole did not flare open, and was little more than a rough spot on the smooth material, such as a moth might leave.

His pale blue eyes glimmering strangely, Morgan held out the canvas bag. "You got a note against the Diamond Cross. This is to take care of it."

Milo Trapp looked surprised. He frowned and showed indecision, turned and walked behind the counter that stretched across the rear of the building. There was no activity in Cactus at this time of day, and Morgan saw only one

other person in the store. The skinny, bald-headed puncher who had delivered Trapp's message to the ranch lounged against the far end of the counter, almost out of sight in the shadows.

Leaning against the cluttered display rack, Morgan waited for the soldierly merchant to weigh the gold. Trapp took the pouch from the balances, ran his fingers through gleaming yellow shavings inside, and his black eyes lifted dubiously to the cowboy's face.

"Anything wrong, mister?" Morgan asked softly. He had sensed a change in Trapp's manner the moment the man learned his business.

Trapp seemed to be thinking hard, and his eyes were shadowed with poorly-veiled disappointment.

"The gold weighs out," Trapp said evenly. "But I can't take it. I don't know where it came from, or why you are paying it. This is between Cap Maxwell and myself. I've already taken out papers to force an auction at the Diamond Cross."

Wayne Morgan took a quick step forward, placing his hands palms down on the counter in front of Milo Trapp. Anger tightened the muscles along his lean jaw, making him look younger, ruggedly handsome.

"You're paid, mister, and that's the way it is." Morgan's voice was slow and soft, but his words were forceful when he introduced himself and told of his affiliation with the Diamond Cross Ranch. "Everybody wants to kick a man when he's down, and Cap Maxwell has had his part of it. From now on when yuh want to kick somebody, Trapp, kick me! Yuh'll get kicked back!"

THE scar on Milo Trapp's face turned white and ugly as the blood drained out of his dark skin. His lips curled as a harsh reply rolled up from his throat, but he stifled the words and relaxed. A sly gleam spread through his hard eyes, and he grinned crookedly at the cowboy.

"All right, Morgan," he said with a chuckle. "We'll let it rest that way. Anything else I can do for you?"

"I'll take a receipt for that gold," Morgan said, still leaning on the counter with his face thrust close to the soldierly man's dark cheek.

"You won't get it," Trapp said flatly.

"You won't get it and you might as well go."

Morgan had sensed the trick a moment before. Milo Trapp had not wanted to be paid, and he had tried to bluff Wayne Morgan away until legal action could be taken against Cap Maxwell. He had surrendered his bluff and resorted to cunning. Trapp had the gold and Morgan had no receipt. So far as Milo Trapp was concerned there had been no settlement made, and Cap Maxwell would have nothing left with which to pay.

"Trapp," Morgan said grimly, "you got mighty pretty teeth. Unless yuh write me out a receipt in ten seconds, you're goin' to be walkin' around town holdin' 'em in yore hand and tellin' folks that Wayne Morgan knocked 'em out!"

The dark-haired cowboy tightened his grip on the barrier before him, tensed his legs to spring across the counter at the scar-faced merchant. Milo Trapp's nonchalant chuckle made him wary, and he waited.

"You talk rough, cowboy," Trapp said. "But that's because you don't know Ace Dolan is standing behind you with a gun aimed at your back. I'd advise you to get your horse and ride out of Cactus. You can't buck Milo Trapp. I own most of this valley, and I intend to own the rest of it. That includes the Diamond Cross Ranch."

In the heat of his anger, Morgan had momentarily forgotten the bald-headed man lounging in the shadows. "Ace" Dolan had moved when the argument started. He touched Morgan with the hard barrel of his gun to let him know that Trapp had not lied.

Morgan was not surprised by Trapp's arrogance. From the things he had heard, he had already decided on the character of the scar-faced man. He was a hard, grasping man—land-hungry, lusting for power. He owned everything around the Diamond Cross and it was only natural that he should want it, too. Did he want it desperately enough to kill Cap Maxwell, scare him out by killing his partners and convincing him that all who had shared the Weeping Woman Mine were doomed? Morgan had come to Cactus to investigate this question, and he thought he already knew the answer.

As Ace Dolan's gun jabbed him in the

ribs, the husky cowboy tensed, his eyes narrowing in indecision. He kept his hands on the counter for a moment, his gaze boring into Milo Trapp's dark face. Straightening, he drew his righthand Colt in a deliberate, unhurried motion. He leveled the barrel across the counter. Ace Dolan started to call out a brisk command. Morgan's voice cut in, hard and brittle, before the bald-headed man could finish his threat.

"There's a gun in my back and one aimed at yore brisket, Trapp," he pointed out calmly. "Tell yore man to start shootin' any time. I'll lay yuh two to one I'll let go the hammer before I fall from Dolan's lead!"

Milo Trapp's dark eyes widened in astonishment. "You are the biggest fool I've ever seen, Morgan!"

"Mebbeso," Morgan conceded icily. "But this is a squeeze play and I aim to call it. I'm countin' to three, and yore man better snap his hammer 'cause I aim to snap mine!"

IT WAS a situation which Milo Trapp's wildest guess would not have touched upon. Trapp lifted his eyes over Morgan's shoulder and looked at Ace Dolan, small bubbles of perspiration coming out on his high forehead. Morgan could hear Dolan's booted feet shifting uneasily behind him, and he was sure the bald-headed man regretted his part in this. He would not shoot a man in the back without an order from Trapp, and Trapp was hesitant because of the danger to himself.

Morgan's gun was less than two feet from his thin waist, and reflex action alone was enough to drop the drawn hammer before the cowboy fell.

His own frame straining with tension, Morgan started counting. His voice was low, rasping, and his brown thumb was white from the grip on the cocked hammer. He spoke the first word and waited, hearing through the stillness in the store all the sounds from the street, the ticking of a clock somewhere in the building. He counted again, saw Trapp's black eyes shift uneasily to Ace Dolan's face. Morgan stretched out the silent interval, then pursed his mouth for the last count.

"Wait!" Milo Trapp spat the word out quickly, fearing he would not be in time.

"You win, Morgan. Put your gun away, Ace."

The squeak of polished leather was loud in the hanging stillness as Dolan holstered his six-gun. But Wayne Morgan held firmly to his own weapon, his lips drawn in a tight line.

"Tell Dolan to take a walk, and not to come back soon," he ordered flatly.

Trapp hesitated a moment, and then gave the command. He watched Morgan's face dubiously as the bald-headed puncher's steps thumped out to the boardwalk, and died away in the distance.

"Now," the dark-haired waddy continued calmly, "throw yore right leg up here and let me take a look at it. I shot a gent last night who wouldn't fall. I'm thinkin' that was you, Trapp."

Milo Trapp's shoulders sagged with defeat as he complied. Morgan touched the tiny puncture in the side of the trousers, and then yanked Trapp's cuff above the top of his boot. The same puncture showed in the polished leather, and Milo Trapp's unusual stamina was no longer a mystery. From a point just below his knee, Milo Trapp's leg was made of wood! The damage to his clothing was so insignificant that Trapp had not bothered to change that day. But Morgan had been looking for just such evidence, and the indication of many battle injuries had suggested to him that Trapp might have had a leg amputated below the knee and still be able to walk without limping.

A few minutes later, Wayne Morgan returned to the dusty street with a signed receipt in his pocket. Realizing that he was beaten, Milo Trapp had talked freely. As Morgan had surmised, the shot at Cap Maxwell had been merely to frighten him. With the old man already upset, Trapp had sought to capitalize on his fear and take the Diamond Cross Ranch away from him. But it was as far as Milo Trapp's aims went. He denied any part in the deaths of Thad Tate and Grady Sloan, and knew nothing of the other odd happenings in Moonstone Valley.

Despite his clash with the man, Morgan was not disappointed by his visit with Milo Trapp. Since the man openly admitted his desire to control the valley, Morgan believed in his innocence. Milo Trapp was removed from his mind as the manipulator of the plot against Cap Max-

well, and that left only one other suspect.

CHAPTER XII

The Traitor

 UPON reaching the front of Milo Trapp's store, Morgan searched the street with his eyes for Blue Hawk. With the right amount of caution and skill he could soon close a noose around the Moonstone Valley outlaw boss, but he would need the Yaqui's help.

There were two or three copper-skinned halfbreeds squatting in the shade of the saloon awning, but Blue Hawk was not among them. A few other men were moving around the streets, having come in from neighboring ranches as the working day neared an end. Ten minutes earlier the street was deserted, but it would stir to brief life as night approached. As his gaze made a complete circuit, the cowboy saw the hulking, squatty frame of Sheriff Walt Starns blocking the doorway to the adobe jail.

The lawman had seen Morgan and was studying him frankly from the shadow of his hatbrim. On his first visit to Cactus, Morgan had planned to ask Starns to search for a record on Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps, but the situation had changed now. The half-burned reward poster was proof that Starns was concealing that information, and it would be foolish to ask him questions.

Returning the sheriff's stare, Morgan shrugged carelessly and walked across the street to the saloon. Blue Hawk might have established a temporary camp outside of town by this time, but Morgan wanted to make sure. The clever Yaqui often pulled his blanket close around his shoulders and slumped in a dark corner of a saloon when he was seeking information.

He stopped in front of the half-doors of Trapp's Bar and looked around him, his nerves strumming with a danger he could feel but could not see. From the corner of his eye he noticed that a stagecoach had been rolled out to the front of the combination livery barn and freight station. The bearded, meek-faced driver and

the oldster who had been lounging in the shade at the side of the building, were stacking a few odd packages in the baggage rack. Shan Loring's moonstones would be among them. It was bait that the white-hooded bandit, Little Joe, would not ignore, and Morgan was eager to lay his own plans.

Still alert from some unknown warning from within, the dark-haired waddy pushed through the swinging doors and headed for the bar. He was half-way across the cramped room, still blinking his eyes from the change of light, when the insistent knot of foreboding left his stomach. There was no use for it to stay there now, for the cause of it was before him.

There were four men leaning against the whisky stained bar, all of them engaged in a discussion with the thin, slick-haired bartender. Two of the men were strangers to him, ordinary cowboys with the sweat and dust of range work still on them. Morgan gave them only a passing glance, his full attention settling on the others.

Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps stood side by side at the center of the bar. Lipps had his back to the door, his gleaming red satin shirt catching all the light of the place and holding it. Venter leaned hip-shot at his side, one scarred boot resting on the brass rail and one clubby arm stretched along the edge of the counter.

Venter saw him first and his close-set dark eyes seemed to sink deeper under the protection of his bushy eyebrows. He said something out of the corner of his mouth, and Stacy Lipps whirled around and stared at Wayne Morgan.

Venter's anger was evident in the burnt brown tinge that hot blood brought to his ugly, sullen face. Lipps remained straight and stiff, his hands edging along the line of his gunbelt. The two cowboys looked from one face to another, and walked hurriedly from the bar, passing within a few feet of Morgan on their way out. The threat in Hobe Venter's face was a thing that could be felt, and the punchers wanted no part of what was to follow. Neither did the bartender. He rubbed his hands nervously across his spotted white apron and retreated to the other end of the long counter, busied himself polishing glasses there.

AN INSTANT after he entered the saloon, Morgan had seen that Blue Hawk was not there. After his interference with the ambush, Morgan had known that he had not seen the last of Hobe Venter and Stacy Lipps. The two gunmen had not forgotten the licking he gave them. Right now, Morgan would rather have turned and walked away. He had outguessed Milo Trapp, outsmarted and bested the scar-faced man in a test of cold nerve. But one brush with death in such a short interval was enough. He could not always be so lucky, and there was much to be done in Moonstone Valley before morning.

There was no way out of it, however. Venter and Lipps were waiting for him. They were two against one, and they meant to have a showdown. This was the thing his inner senses had tried to warn him against, but Morgan had walked into it. He would have to face it, match his guns and his wits against the two men at the bar.

Morgan went on across the room and stopped in front of the bartender. Keeping his eyes on the two men a few feet away, he said:

"Whisky—straight and mean."

"Leave it be!" Hobe Venter's guttural tones stopped the slender bartender as the man turned away. "Yuh won't need no whisky, mister," he said to Morgan. "Dead men don't drink it!"

Frost settled into the cold blue eyes of Wayne Morgan. He faced Hobe Venter squarely, saw the man's thick fingers forming hooks above his twin guns. Venter was not sparring for an opening. He was making it direct and speedy. Beside him

Stacy Lipps was silent and watchful, his thin face pale and tense.

"A man wanted in Texas for murder and rustlin' ought to stay out of trouble while he's healthy, Venter," Morgan said softly. He repeated the information he had read on the reward dodger for a reason. Venter would be fast and so would Stacy Lipps. With the odds against him, Morgan knew any stab that cut deep into the gunmen's nerves would increase his chances of outdrawing them.

Hobe Venter's heavy black eyebrows lifted in surprise and then settled in a more intense scowl.

"Yuh know my name and yuh know my rep. That can mean only one thing. That fat toad of a sheriff has finally got cold feet and called in a U. S. Marshal. That's what I pegged yuh for, mister, and I must be right. I knowed we couldn't believe that stuff about bygones bein' bygones in Cactus, if we'd handle a bootleg job and keep our mouths shut. When the rest of the boys hear about you, mister, they'll blow Stars to Kingdom Come! You'll be gone already!"

Venter's growling threat was a signal for action. As he clamped his thick mouth fiercely shut, his hands rammed with dazzling speed toward his low holsters. That last determined gesture of Venter's lips had told Morgan what to expect, and he moved as the gunman did.

Where Hobe Venter's motions were forceful and jerky, Wayne Morgan acted with the smooth precision of a ball-bearing machine. As Venter's clubby hands stabbed downward, Morgan's wrists flicked effortlessly in a move that eyes

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could not follow. In a sporting game, Venter would have looked fast. The comparison with Wayne Morgan made him slow. He had his guns out in the flicker of an eyelash, his thumbs clutching at the hammers. That was as far as he progressed, for two sharp explosions shook the rafters of the weathered saloon.

Hobe Venter staggered back a step as the first slug burrowed into his chest, and then took another as the second bullet drove in behind the other. He kept going back then, his steps getting slower each time, and his hips slowly sagging toward his knees. At last he seemed to step completely through the floor, but all he did was fold up backward on the floor and die. A shining trail of blood marked the course of his lifeless body.

LONG before Hobe Venter crumpled, Wayne Morgan swung his smoking Colts toward long-legged Stacy Lipps. He had expected to feel the shock of Lipps' lead before he could turn, and he blinked in surprise when he saw that the dudish gunman had not moved. He still stood in the same spot, his hands raised peacefully over his head as Morgan whirled toward him.

Though he was puzzled by Stacy Lipps' odd behavior, Morgan did not take time to ask the man's reasons. Keeping the hot guns aimed at Lipps' chest, he backed slowly toward the door. He backed straight into the prodding barrel of a gun! As he stopped in surprise, a grinding, wheezing cough blew hot air against the back of his neck and he did not need to turn to see who held the gun. It was Sheriff Walt Starns.

"March right back up front until I can get the handcuffs on yuh, pilgrim," Starns growled. "I seen yuh gun Venter down, and I aim to stretch yore neck for it! Move on!"

Seeing no chance of escape, Morgan obeyed. The ponderous lawman already disliked him, and Morgan did not dare oppose the man while Starns had him at such a disadvantage. He dropped the black Colts at his feet, and walked back to the bar, a sinking sensation of failure welling up within him.

"I always keep an eye on pilgrims like you," Starns grumbled, moving around in front of the cowboy and fumbling at

his creaking belt for handcuffs. "Sooner or later I git 'em where I want 'em!"

The fat sheriff shoved Morgan irritably with the gun barrel again, reached out with the open iron bracelet to snap it on the cowboy's left wrist. But the handcuff was never closed. Starns had ignored Stacy Lipps' presence, turning his back on the slim man while he talked to Morgan. Stacy Lipps moved forward with the lithe speed of a dancer, his iron-handled six-gun held in his hand.

With a cruel twist of his lips, the gunman brought the butt of the heavy gun down on Walt Starns' small head. The sheriff's weight shook the building as he crashed down and lay quivering and gasping in the trampled sawdust of the floor.

"Let's get out of here, mister," Lipps said tightly, running for the door.

Morgan did not have to be told a second time. Scooping up his guns on the run, Morgan burst through the half-doors right behind Stacy Lipps. A single leap landed him in the roan's saddle and he galloped swiftly out of Cactus without looking back. There would be no pursuit for a while. It would take an hour for Starns' to recover sufficiently to organize a posse.

In spite of his escape, Morgan felt like he was riding out of one danger spot into another. For Stacy Lipps, humped low over the neck of a fleet-footed bay, was riding beside him and he knew the man could not be trusted.

CHAPTER XIII

A Deal in Blood



PERHAPS Walt Starns organized a posse, but if he did, Wayne Morgan never knew it. He put the town quickly behind him, circling away from the trail for the first few miles and then cutting back to a wagon road that hugged the side of a brushy gulch a few miles from the Diamond Cross Ranch.

Since his retreat from the saloon he had said nothing to Stacy Lipps, but the thin, gaudily-clad man stayed with him, his pale, shifty eyes flitting often to the cowboy's face. Morgan was both angered and puzzled by his presence. Despite

Lipps' help, he was not a man the dark-haired cowboy could like or respect. He had turned against Venter when the burly outlaw needed him most. His disloyalty might have saved Wayne Morgan's life, but on the other hand it might have saved his own, for neither of the men could match the dark-haired waddy's gunspeed. Either way, Morgan knew the man's principles were cowardly and deceitful.

Feeling safe for the present from any retribution Starns might make, Morgan pulled the roan to a halt in the middle of the brush-bordered trail and twisted in the saddle to look at Stacy Lipps who halted beside him.

"Yuh can spill it now, Lipps," Morgan said flatly. "You ain't throwin' in with me because of any brotherly love. What is it?"

Stacy Lipps' slim mouth twisted in a humorless grin. "I've heard of gents like you, mister. Fast guns huntin' for glory and plenty of bounty money. I want to make a deal with you. I figger you want the rep of takin' Little Joe alive, so you couldn't afford to let me'n Hobe Venter ruin your chance. You won't find no reward on my scalp, marshal, so I think it's safe for me to do business with you. That way you won't have to cut Walt Starns in, and you'll get more help."

"Business like what?" Morgan asked suspiciously.

"Like mebbe fifty thousand dollars in reward money split two ways—half for me and half for you. I can tell you where to find fifteen owlhooters worth that kind of dinero. Once you round 'em up, we can both retire."

A suspicion started in Wayne Morgan's mind by Hobe Venter's words in the saloon was verified by Stacy Lipps. The cowboy was certain now that Moonstone Valley had become the refuge of more than one killer such as Venter. There was an organized gang of wanted men operating at the command of some ruthless outlaw boss and bound to secrecy by the knowledge of their crimes which Walt Starns held over their heads. It was not logical that Starns was their leader, for the lawman was too clumsy to hold together the clever scheme which Morgan was slowly tearing to shreds.

Long ago, Morgan had decided that a motive stronger than vengeance had ruined the lives of those involved in the

Weeping Woman Mine. As soon as he had found the moonstone dropped at the Diamond Cross he had guessed the real power behind the plot. It was the "boot-leg" job mentioned by Venter.

There were two ways for the cowboy to get the proof he needed to expose the killer boss. Stacy Lipps could answer the incriminating questions, and Little Joe could provide the same help. Morgan preferred to deal with Little Joe. He could not trust a man whose morals were as flexible as those of Stacy Lipps. The thin gunman was ready to sell out his companions, make a deal with their blood, and he could easily have a sudden change of heart and lead Wayne Morgan into a death trap.

"I've heard of men like you, too, Lipps," Morgan replied coldly after a moment's thought. "Too white-livered to be honest, and too greedy to make a good crook! If you'd coyote on yore pards, you'd coyote on me!"

While he had debated Stacy Lipps' traitorous offer, Morgan had made the mistake of turning his head away for a moment. The firm set of the cowboy's jaw had evidently warned the gunman before Morgan replied, for Lipps was ready for him. When Morgan looked back at him, Lipps had the iron-handled Colt in his hand and his gray eyes were narrowed to pin-pointed flares of hate.

"It's a good game that pays off two ways, mister," Lipps spat grimly. "I can take yore body back to Sheriff Walt Starns and he'll pat me on the back for bein' smart enough to play along with you long enough to kill you!"

IT WAS not a matter of choice any more. Stacy Lipps had revealed his true color, and the secret could be hidden only in death. The risk was too great to let Morgan live now. Slowly, deliberately, Stacy Lipps pulled back the hammer on his drawn gun. Fascination for this power of execution he held in his hands turned his pinched face a rosy red. His long thumb turned white as he took careful aim before unloosing the shot that would tear Wayne Morgan's heart out of his chest.

An instant later the shot burst the gripping quiet air of the trail! The breath Morgan had been holding went out of him.

It was forced out by relief, however, and not by a slug from Lipps' six-gun. The shot had come from the side of the trail. Hot lead clanged and squealed as it struck harder metal, and Stacy Lipps' Colt spun from his numbed fingers and whirled into the brush. The thin man cursed in pain, rammed his stinging fingers into his mouth.

Few men could shoot with such accuracy, and Wayne Morgan knew one such man was Blue Hawk. The Indian had either trailed them from town or was camped near this spot.

A moment later Blue Hawk's slow precise voice spoke from the shelter of the undergrowth nearby:

"That shot was for the gun; the next will be for you, Senor Lipps!"

Morgan knew the Yaqui would not show himself in an open display of friendship, and he did not wait for him. The dark-haired cowboy drew one of his own guns, swung to the trail with his coiled rope in his other hand. Working swiftly, he dragged the thin, frightened gunman from saddle and bound his arms and legs, leaving him stretched out on his back in the center of the trail.

Afterward, Morgan stepped back and regarded Lipps with contempt. Playing out the marshal role with which the gunman had saddled him, Morgan said:

"Yuh feel right in with our plan, Lipps. Me and Walt Starns can still collect that bounty, and you'll head the list of prisoners."

Without waiting for the man to reply, he climbed back to the roan's saddle. Until he had turned a bend out of the bound man's sight, Morgan stayed on the wagon trail. Then he cut quickly into the undergrowth, pulled to a halt and looked around him. Blue Hawk appeared from behind a clump of wild rose bushes a moment later, leading the gray behind him.

After hearing of Morgan's tribulations in town, the Yaqui explained why he had not been in Cactus. After leaving Whit Berry in a doctor's care that morning, Blue Hawk had returned to the hideout in the hills. During the morning he had moved the horses and equipment to a more convenient location near the Diamond Cross. In their hasty ride out of town, Morgan and Lipps had passed close to the new camp and Blue Hawk had

trailed them, unable to understand the thin gunman's apparent friendship.

Blue Hawk glanced worriedly over his shoulder and reproached the dark-haired waddy for his negligent treatment of Stacy Lipps.

"I do not understand about the bounty, Senor, but the gunman will not be your prisoner," Blue Hawk said. "The knots were careless and loose. He will escape soon. Why did we leave him?"

Wayne Morgan chuckled grimly. "I'm hopin' he'll escape, Hawk, and that he'll go on thinkin' Sheriff Walt Starns tipped off a U. S. Marshal about the killers and outlaws he's been protectin' in Moonstone Valley. They'll think Starns has got cold feet on 'em and is backin' out of the deal. Lipps will go straight to the gang and talk his head off."

"Then it was a trick to make the gang come out in the open," Blue Hawk said, his black eyes showing a twinkle of appreciation at the cowboy's ingenuity.

Morgan nodded. "They'll act about like Venter said they would. They'll come out in the open and go after Starns for double-crossin' them."

BLUE HAWK scowled and searched the cowboy's face with questioning eyes. "I had suspected Starns as the leader of the trouble here, Senor. They would not kill their chief."

"No," Morgan said thoughtfully. "They won't kill their chief, Hawk. Shan Loring is too smart for that."

"Shan Loring!" Blue Hawk echoed in surprise. "The loco one is the killer boss, Senor?"

"That's right, Hawk. It all ties up. Everybody who was threatened or killed met trouble near the mine. That meant somebody was guardin' the place, keepin' prowlers away for some reason. The reason was gold, Hawk. Somewhere up there Shan Loring has found gold! Rather than share with his three partners, he just decided to kill 'em. He made a deal with Walt Starns to get him some men to do the work. Those moonstone shipments Loring makes are a fake. Some of those boxes carry gold under the stones, 'cause the rock dropped by Little Joe at Cap Maxwell's ranch had collected some of the dust. That was what made me suspicious."

Blue Hawk looked dubious and unconvinced. "But he is a wild man, Senor, and the plan was so clever. And the boxes you opened at the stage contained only moonstones. How do you explain that?"

"I'm aimin' to let Little Joe explain that, Hawk. That bandit has been stealin' gold instead of rocks, and he brought some of it to Cap Maxwell as a gift. But don't let Shan Loring fool you. When I fought him, he thought clearly, planned his attack smart. He forgot himself once and cursed without all the mumblin' he usually does. The first time I saw him, I figured it took a pretty good brain to repeat everything twice. Shan Loring is a good actor, but he's also a killer. I think Little Joe can prove all I've said, Hawk."

"But where will we find the bandit?"

Morgan smiled. "The six o'clock stage is carryin' some more moonstones. Little Joe won't miss it. We're goin' to have to hurry so we can talk to the bandit and still get back to Cactus in time to give Sheriff Walt Starns a hand. I'm glad you brought Midnight down from the hills. Wayne Morgan has become right unpopular in Cactus, so this is a job for the Masked Rider!"

CHAPTER XIV

The Fate of Velma Sloan



HALF a mile below the rocky cut over the mountains, the stage road was made gloomy in the late afternoon by the two ridges that sloped up on each side of it. The undergrowth was heavy, shading the sheltered hollows, and the bearded, meek-faced driver sat hunched on the edge of his seat with his eyes flitting from side to side. He had asked to be transferred from the midnight run, for he still could not forget the violent scene he had witnessed the night before.

As he neared the turn where the trail turned upward to the bare hills, he felt somewhat relieved because he was almost out of the brush and nothing had yet happened to Shan Loring's moonstones. Holding the reins in one hand, he dug out a battered plug of tobacco from his pocket and bit off a sizable chunk,

tonguing it back into the corner of his jaw.

Suddenly, he stood upright in the box, his nervous gulp speeding the tobacco on its way. It lodged in his windpipe, almost choking him before he could cough it up. He flung the tobacco to the ground, and finally got the stage stopped, his open mouth working without sound.

The first thing he had seen was the movement of a bush ahead. Then slowly a magnificent black stallion had stepped into view, carrying a black-clad masked man who held two guns in his hands. He recognized the flapping black cape and hard blue eyes of the Masked Rider immediately, tried to voice his surrender. His voice stuck in his throat a moment later as a copper-skinned Indian rode out from the other side of the trail, a Winchester leveled across the saddle of his gray.

"Behave yourself and you won't get hurt," the Masked Rider said, his resonant voice ringing through the hollow as he rode closer. "Now climb down to the ground and keep your mouth shut until we're gone. We're taking this coach!"

The black-clad outlaw swung down and helped the bearded driver to the ground, giving him some advice in low tones. While he held his gun on the man, Blue Hawk fastened the stallion and his own gray pony to the rear of the vehicle.

"I am ready, Senor," the Yaqui said quietly, climbing to the driver's box and taking up the reins. The Robin Hood outlaw nodded, jerked the door open and leaped inside the coach as Blue Hawk started the vehicle rolling.

Still pale with fear and surprise, the bearded jehu stared after the disappearing stage in consternation. He took off his battered black hat and slammed it to the ground in disgust.

"First Little Joe steals that crazy Shan Loring's moonstones, and now the Masked Rider steals the whole dargged coach! I was never cut out to do this kind of work."

While Blue Hawk sent the horses humping over the steep ridge, the Masked Rider hunkered low between the seats and waited silently. The Yaqui had received careful instructions before they left their camp, and the Robin Hood outlaw knew he would fill his part of the plan. Somewhere behind them the disgruntled stage driver would be trailing them on foot,

for the masked man had told him that their need for the coach was only temporary. They would leave it for him on the trail ahead.

They were through the rock cut, and twisting north along the rim of the valley when the angry crack of a rifle stopped them. As soon as the shot came, the black-clad outlaw tensed for a spring outside. That warning shot was Little Joe's customary signal.

Rising to peep through the narrow slit at Blue Hawk's back, the Masked Rider saw the white-hooded bandit bring the prancing mustang to a halt beyond the horses. In a soft, muffled voice the bandit demanded that Blue Hawk throw down the crates from the baggage rack. Acting on orders, Blue Hawk made no move to obey. Instead, he openly defied the hooded road-agent.

"It is said," the Yaqui declared, "that you have never shot a driver. Now, you must kill me, Senor Little Joe, or I will drive over you!"

Without waiting for an answer, the Yaqui lashed at the horses and started forward. It was a move with which the hooded bandit had never been forced to encounter before. Though holding a rifle, Little Joe did not offer to shoot. For a moment, the mustang was held stubbornly still, and then Little Joe swerved the horse aside, started to spur on down the slope beside the coach.

THE Masked Rider was not surprised by the bandit's lack of persistence. It was a test he had purposefully planned, and now he was convinced of Little Joe's identity. As the mustang came past the slow-moving coach, the Masked Rider flung the door open and leaped out, his outthrust arms closing around Little Joe's slim waist. The road-agent was whipped quickly from saddle, tumbling lightly to the ground beside the black-clad outlaw.

As the horseman fell, the hood slipped off and a mass of long, shimmering black curls tumbled out on the ground. Even Blue Hawk made a sound of astonishment as a beautiful white-faced girl squirmed and clawed at the Masked Rider's shielded face.

"Take it easy, wildcat," the Masked Rider said breathlessly. "You don't have to fight me. I know you're Velma Sloan

and I'm here to help yuh!"

The girl's struggles subsided and the Robin Hood outlaw freed his grasp on her wrist. She stood up quickly, her hands shoved deep into the pockets of her close-fitting cowboy overalls. A small, pearl-handled pistol protruded from the waistband of her trousers, but she made no move to draw it.

"How do you know me, and who are you?" Velma Sloan asked suspiciously, her voice clear and musical now that the muffling hood was gone. "Anyway I'm glad it's over. I've been scared to death ever since I almost walked into a trap last night. As long as nobody but Milo Trapp and the sheriff was interested in me, I didn't have to worry. Trapp was glad to see Shan Loring suffer."

Introducing himself, the Masked Rider explained hurriedly how he had learned her identity and his reasons for unmasking her.

"A friend of mine, Wayne Morgan, told me of a note yuh left with some gold at the Diamond Cross," he said. "The printing was too fine and the language was too good for the kind of men you have around Cactus. Besides that, yuh talked little and never got reckless with a gun like most stage robbers. Then, I saw yuh once when yuh didn't know about it, and I knew that only a woman would be clever enough to fashion a hood from a—white petticoat!"

Color painted Velma Sloan's creamy cheeks with a fresh beauty, and she shoved the renovated piece of apparel into the brush with the toe of her boot. There was no anger left in her hazel eyes as she turned toward the Robin Hood outlaw and smiled.

Her face sobered as she spoke of the things that had brought the black-clad outlaw to Moonstone Valley.

"Then you know Shan Loring is the real killer," Velma said slowly. "He's not crazy or loco or anything close to honest. He's mad—mad with greed for all the gold he found in an old cave that runs under the tunnel of the Weeping Woman Mine and picks up the lode they lost there. It's the main mineral deposit, and Loring kept searching for it until he found it. His insanity was an act to keep from helping Cap Maxwell and my—my father make up the losses. When he found the

gold deposit, he knew my father and Cap Maxwell would want to divide it equally with all the stockholders, so he kept up his act and did everything he could to get rid of them."

As Velma Sloan continued to talk hurriedly, all the Masked Rider's observations were proved correct. On the day they were killed, Thad Tate and Grady Sloan had gone into Moonstone Valley in a desperate attempt to find sufficient gold to save their ranches. When Velma found her father on the trail, his head battered by a rough stone, the old rancher had forced himself back to consciousness long enough to speak a few words before he died.

He had been in the cave below the mine and found the real vein—a solid sheet of gold between two layers of rock. Sloan had seen evidence that the wealth was being mined in a wasteful manner, pried out from the ore in small slivers with knives and chisels. He and Tate had suspected Shan Loring's deception then and were on their way to see Cap Maxwell when the wild-eyed miner waylaid them.

AFTERWARD, Velma Sloan had surmised that Loring's moonstone shipments were a blind. But the miner had operated cautiously. Once a week he would pack the canvas pouches with gold shavings, covering the top of the metal with a thin layer of moonstones. On other days he had shipped nothing but full boxes of the little blue rocks. In order to get the gold, the girl had held up the stage every time she saw the giant redhead leave the badlands with his pack mules. The shipments were probably going to Loring's banker in Kansas City instead of being claimed by a jeweler.

"You were taking an awful chance posin' as a road-agent," the masked man said seriously. "Why didn't yuh let Cap Maxwell and Whit Berry know about this? That young cowboy has about worried himself sick?"

At mention of Whit Berry a sparkling tear flashed in Velma's eyes, and the Robin Hood outlaw knew she had thought often of the foreman. But like other women of the frontier, Velma Sloan was proud and self-sufficient. She could ride and shoot as well as a man and had no

feminine fears of darkness and strange places.

Though she was daring and headstrong, she could not speak of Whit Berry without a tremor in her voice.

"Knowing what I was doing to Whit almost made me give it up," she replied softly after a moment. "But I was afraid to show myself until some honest lawman came to Cactus. I knew Walt Starns was a part of the gang, and Shan Loring would kill me on sight. He knew my father lived long enough to talk, and when I got back to the ranch that day from town, Loring was waiting for me. He—he tried to choke me, but I slipped away and got to my horse. After that I hit upon the idea of the hood. But I'm certainly glad you're here now, whoever you are, Masked Rider. I thought nobody would ever be smart enough to figure things out and help me!"

Motioning to Blue Hawk, the Masked Rider strode to the back of the coach and started untying the black stallion while the Yaqui freed the gray.

"When I found that moonstone at the Diamond Cross," he said over his shoulder, "I figured there was a connection between it and the gold. You must have had some of the stones in your pocket, and when yuh threw the gold down yuh threw the stone, too. Moonstones naturally reminded me of Shan Loring, and then a gent name of Venter mentioned a "boot-leg" job. That sounded to me like sneak gold shipments. Your help to Maxwell and that petticoat hood made me decide Little Joe was Velma Sloan, and I knew you'd have proof for all my suspicions."

Velma Sloan nodded, her eyes showing admiration for the Robin Hood rider's infallible deductions. "I have a fortune in gold cached in the cave where I've been hiding. As soon as Shan Loring hangs for killing my father and Thad Tate, Cap Maxwell can divide with the stockholders and still have enough to pay off his debts."

Blue Hawk was already mounted and waiting as the Masked Rider stepped to Midnight's saddle. "I think it's safe for you to see Whit Berry now, miss, but we'll have to move fast to get Loring. He's out in the open now and he'll try to make a clean sweep, kill Cap Maxwell so there'll be no claim on the mine and get Walt Starns for double-crossin' him. We've got to get to Cactus by the time Loring does,

and we've already wasted too much time!"

CHAPTER XV

Death Swap



LATER, three hard-faced men and a pretty black-haired girl stopped their horses on the outskirts of Cactus and gazed solemnly down the curving street. Darkness lay heavy over the town. The only visible light came from the saloon and the adobe jail nearby. There was only six horses waiting at the rails, and no one walked the warped boardwalks. It was as if the whole range knew that the customary slumber of Cactus was to be shattered tonight by barking guns and cries of death. Or had it already come?

It was hard to tell whether Shan Loring and his gang had already been there. From the rock-crowded badlands to the ramshackle settlement was a long and tiring ride, but the Masked Rider had also used up much time since he left the stage road. He sat the saddle of the big black stallion restlessly now, exchanging silent glances with the stern-faced Yaqui who had stopped the gray beside him. Behind the two companions of the danger trails was Whit Berry and Velma Sloan. But Cap Maxwell was not with them, and it was this fact that made the keen blue eyes of the Masked Rider narrow in a worried fashion behind the eye-holes of the domino mask while he watched the street.

At Velma Sloan's insistence, the masked man had not ridden directly to Cactus. When they left the stage road she had gone with them, persuading the Robin Hood rider and Blue Hawk to circle around the Diamond Cross first. Though she had wanted an escort on her ride to see Whit Berry, her plea had not been entirely selfish.

The girl declared that two men would have little chance against the guns of Shan Loring's owlhoot gang. She could handle a rifle or six-gun as well as a man, and Whit Berry and Cap Maxwell would strengthen their attack.

When they had reached the ranch there had been little time for a joyous reunion. Whit Berry had been speechless with sur-

prise, staring at Velma Sloan for a moment in unbelief. Then the girl spoke, and Whit Berry took her lovingly in his arms. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had turned away while they kissed and whispered tearfully between themselves for a few seconds, and then the robed outlaw's quiet reminder of their mission had brought them quickly back to reality.

In the next instant, the Masked Rider was aware that the importance of their mission had been doubled. Whit Berry, still weak from the wound in his head, was alone at the ranch. Cap Maxwell had sent a cowboy named Wayne Morgan into town to pay a note and the cowboy had not returned. Still convinced that all at the Diamond Cross were targets of the mysterious killer, the rancher had become worried, and had gone to Cactus in search of Wayne Morgan.

"Cap was still mad over me bein' shot," the foreman said, "and he was goin' to the jail and rake Walt Starns over for not doin' somethin' about it. If Wayne wasn't in town, it's no tellin' what Cap will say to Starns!"

Realizing that the old rancher was definitely a potential victim of Shan Loring, the Masked Rider searched the streets uneasily for Cap Maxwell's stocky figure while he waited. The wild-eyed miner was almost certain to track down Walt Starns, if Stacy Lipps clung to the false conclusion that Wayne Morgan was a U. S. Marshal whom the sheriff had called to the town.

An open attack on the lawman would disclose Loring's outlawry, and he would make a final desperate gamble for sole possession of the mining claim. The only way he could gain that was by killing Cap Maxwell. The men with him would be fighting for their lives—heartless, depraved men who had found immunity from their past crimes here and would kill the man who had given them freedom and then taken it away—Walt Starns.

"Perhaps we are too late, Senor," Blue Hawk murmured. "It is very quiet."

Whit Berry kned his mount closer to the Masked Rider's stallion and shook his head in a troubled manner. "If Loring has been here, that means Cap is—"

Before the foreman could complete the sentence, Blue Hawk raised his tawny hand as a signal for silence. The Yaqui

cocked his head to one side and glanced sideward at the black-clad outlaw.

"They are here, Senor!"

IMMEDIATELY the Yaqui's keen hearing was verified. The rhythmic beat of running hoofs was clear above the air, and then a hard-riding group of horsemen swept into view at the opposite end of the street.

Speaking hurriedly, the Masked Rider gave orders. He and Blue Hawk circled through a weed-grown alley and came up behind the two huge boulders around which the town had built its street and huddled its buildings. Whit Berry had allowed Velma Sloan to come this far so he could be near her, but he refused to let her join the fight. He leaned aside and kissed her warmly, and then slipped away to take up his station beside the livery barn.

Though the girl had risked possible ambush and constant danger to recover gold which was rightfully hers, she was again a woman now. She listened obediently to Whit Berry's instructions and then watched him ride away with hope in her eyes that he would return safely to become her husband in a few days.

A shot broke the calm that shrouded the sleepy town of Cactus. Above the explosion rose a high-pitched battle cry, and then other guns took up the chant, one sharp explosion blending with another until it became an unceasing roar.

Slipping hurriedly from Midnight's saddle, the Masked Rider dashed to the shadow of the big rock near the street. Blue Hawk melted into the darkness beside him, his rifle gripped expectantly in his coppery hands. Shan Loring dashed past them, leading fifteen gun-hung men toward the adobe jail a short distance away. Their guns were still flashing and yammering as the masked man moved around to get a clearer view.

As the killer gang left their saddles and sought cover in the darkness, the Masked Rider laid a warning hand on Blue Hawk's shoulder when the Yaqui fingered his rifle impatiently. The robed outlaw had not drawn his own black Colts and there was no sound from Whit Berry's rifle beside the livery barn. None of them were to fire until the Masked Rider gave the signal and the Robin Hood outlaw had

no intention of joining the battle until he was sure of Cap Maxwell's whereabouts.

At the first blast of gunfire, the lights in Trapp's bar went out. The patrons there and the other townspeople were taking no part in this fight, but they were waiting and watching from various shelters, wondering what it was about.

Shortly after the outlaw gang dismounted and scattered for shelter, the firing stopped. It took the Masked Rider only a second to see the reason. From the shattered window of the jail a white flag of truce was waving frantically.

An order was bawled through the night and then Shan Loring rode to the front of the jail. There was nothing pitiable about the giant redhead now. He had known what the attack meant and had discarded all pretenses. He was prepared to kill.

Seated solidly in the saddle of a strong-chested bay, Shan Loring's massive shoulders were straight and determined. A broad-brimmed gray Stetson was set far back on his head, and a clean, tight-fitting flannel shirt rippled and rolled with the action of his muscles. Even in the poor light, the masked man could see that the shimmering red beard had been washed and combed, and the straggly hair had been carefully pushed back under the hat to allow better shooting. The rifle which he fondled under one arm made him look like a conquering general riding out to accept the surrender of a continent. He was an impressive figure, a deadly and ruthless man gone mad with greed.

Fat and ponderous, Sheriff Walt Starns stepped furtively out to meet him as Loring drew up at the edge of the walk. The hulking lawman spoke quietly, mopping his flabby face with the palms of his hands while he talked.

"The boys say you double-crossed them and me, Walt," Shan Loring said, his voice full-toned and harsh. "They say you brought in a marshal, they want to string you up. Either I back them up, or they'll turn on me. Let's go, Walt!"

Walt Starns held up a restraining hand as Loring gestured with the rifle. "Wait, Shan. I'm still workin' for yuh. Cap Maxwell come in to see me, and I've got him tied up inside. I'll turn him over to yuh for a chance to hunt down that Morgan hombre and prove I'm playing square!"

THE Masked Rider had heard all he wanted to hear. With riches in his hand, Cap Maxwell was closer to death at this moment than he had ever been before. Whether or not Shan Loring accepted the slow-thinking sheriff's bargain, he would still slay Cap Maxwell, either before or after he killed Walt Starns.

"This is it, Hawk!" the masked man said sharply.

He stepped away from the rock and pursed his lips in a keen whistle as Blue Hawk ran toward the gray. Twenty yards away, Midnight raised his head when he heard the whistle and then galloped swiftly toward the robed outlaw. The Masked Rider leaped into saddle on the run, his hands snaking the worn black Colts from leather.

Shan Loring was still waiting in front of the jail as the black-clad horseman thundered into the open. Behind Loring a dozen bearded men had stood up from water troughs and rain barrels to listen. They came alive at once, startled cries bursting from their throats.

A gun went off and a whistling slug clipped at the corner of the Masked Rider's wind-whipped black cape. The Robin Hood rider's own guns rattled a defiant answer. A lean hunch-backed man threw his arms toward the heavens and dropped silently to the earth. A stocky gunman beside him turned to run as the Masked Rider kept coming, an invincible, grim black shadow of doom for lawless men. Whit Berry's rifle cracked beside the livery barn, and the stocky man went down screaming.

The foreman's shot came at an opportune time. It started a confused rush along the streets, made the killer gang dubious of the number which might have surrounded them. They were all on their feet now, running and shooting. Some of them tried to reach waiting horses, but Blue Hawk had outguessed them. The shrewd Yaqui was there, his rifle gushing flame and hot lead at the terrified outlaws. Horses ran, too, tripping on looped reins and falling. The neighing of spooked animals mingled with the curses of wounded men, and moans of the dying. The appearance of a single, black-clad horseman had started a riot, unloosing a bedlam of sound and movement in the streets of Cactus.

Slowing his reckless charge, the robed outlaw called a command to the stallion. Midnight whirled like a trained performer, rearing high as the masked man turned him back toward the jail. Certain victory had changed so swiftly into disordered defeat that Shan Loring was still dumbfounded. But he came to his senses as the famed Robin Hood outlaw started back up the streets.

The giant miner jumped to the ground, his rifle raised. "It—it's that blasted Masked Rider gent who pulled Maxwell out of the fire we started in the hollow," Shan Loring yelled. "Walt Starns, you dirty son, this was a trap!"

The anger Shan Loring felt toward the black-clad outlaw was turned abruptly on Walt Starns who he believed had betrayed him. The giant miner shifted his raised rifle toward the lawman, an ugly red spark jumping from the muzzle as he fired. Walt Starns jerked convulsively, toppled to the boardwalk and then rolled off into the dust of the street. A wheezing, grinding cough raised a dirty cloud under his face and then the sheriff died.

Flinging a quick look over his shoulder, Shan Loring stepped across Walt Starns' lifeless body and dashed toward the open jail door. Close enough to witness the cold-blooded murder, the Robin Hood outlaw's eyes turned a frosty blue as he left the saddle to go after the fleeing miner.

He had been too interested in Shan Loring to look behind him. Guns were still booming close as Whit Berry and Blue Hawk continued to swap lead with the retreating killer gang. As he hit the ground in front of the jail, he was suddenly reminded that the odds were still one-sided. A rush of air made him turn just in time.

A gangling, bearded outlaw, who had been lying low behind an idle buckboard nearby, sprang at the robed outlaw's back, a rifle drawn over his shoulder like a club. The Masked Rider's arms snapped downward, and the heavy stock whistled past his head. He had ducked rapidly, but he still had not been fast enough. The rifle struck his shoulder, knocking him to his knees. A wrenching pain tore through his back, making him groggy.

CONFIDENT of success, the outlaw stood over him and shifted the ends

of the rifle. With the muzzle two feet from the Masked Rider's face, the killer reached for the trigger. There was not time to stop the shot, and the Robin Hood outlaw did not try. He fell forward from his knees, catching himself with his hands as the rifle roared. Flame and lead hummed through the air where his head had been a moment before.

The fall carried him almost to the killer's feet. Two strong gloved hands grabbed the outlaw's legs like the prongs of a bear trap, yanking his feet from under him. The tall man fell on his back, tried

the horse in less than a second. He slammed Cap Maxwell's bound figure across the saddle, jerked the reins free and leaped up behind the helpless rancher. Shan Loring still thought only of the gold claim, refusing to recognize defeat. If he got into the hills, a single bullet through Cap Maxwell's brain would leave Loring as the only owner.

"Loring!" The Masked Rider's booming voice was clear above the dying gunfire as he sprinted toward the red-headed miner. "Loring, stop or I'll kill yuh!"

Shan Loring threw back his head and

to kick free. Shifting his grip, the masked man snatched at the rifle barrel. The surprised outlaw was disarmed before he could resist. He jerked erect, ready to launch a new attack.

The Masked Rider slammed the butt of the heavy gun against the killer's forehead, and the man lay down again, limp and lifeless this time.

Climbing to his feet, the Robin Hood outlaw pawed the earth for the guns he had dropped. He found them, and stood up at Blue Hawk's urgent call.

"Look, Senor!" The Yaqui was twenty yards away, still answering the diminishing fire of the retreating outlaw gang. "The loco one is escaping!"

Following the Indian's pointing finger, the black-clad man turned back toward the jail. Shan Loring was coming out the door with a squirming, kicking figure slung across one broad shoulder. The giant miner turned left toward Sheriff Walt Starns' buckskin, the only horse that remained tied at the bullet-scratched rail.

His long strides covered the distance to

laughed wildly as he swerved the buckskin away from the rack. "You can't hit me without hitting Maxwell!"

Jabbing the horse's flanks with his heels, Loring hunkered low over Cap Maxwell's sprawled figure and turned to run. But the wild-eyed miner had underestimated the skill of the robed outlaw. Other men might have shirked at the risk involved, but the Masked Rider had full confidence in his own ability. As Shan Loring looked around to voice a final call of defiance, the black-clad man's righthand Colt bucked angrily in his fist.

Shan Loring's taunt rose into a blood-curdling scream, and then the giant miner slipped sideways in the saddle and toppled over the buckskin's shoulder. The Masked Rider's single bullet had entered the man's open mouth as he turned to yell!

The bloody battle ended as it had started—with a single shot. As Shan Loring screamed and died, all other firing ceased and Whit Berry and Blue Hawk walked out to gaze at the big miner's corpse. One of Loring's feet was still

caught in the stirrup, and the buckskin dragged him through the dust a few yards and then stopped.

Seeing the man who had brought them here and protected them had been killed, the killer gang had no reason to fight longer. Those that remained on their feet made a final rush for freedom. Some of them had died tonight, and others would be tracked down as soon as a responsible law officer was appointed to replace Sheriff Walt Starns.

With Whit Berry and Blue Hawk walking at his side, the Masked Rider rushed forward and lifted gaunt old Cap Maxwell to the ground, freeing his arms and legs and helping him to his feet.

"By the Saints!" Maxwell murmured, "I might've knowed no man could shoot that mad man off'n me, less'n it was the Masked Rider! But what happened to Shan? What's goin' on here?"

"You're a rich man, Cap," Whit Berry said happily. "And I've found Velma! She's safe and waitin' for me!"

"What!" The one exploding word that came from Maxwell's lips was more of an exclamation of shock than a question.

WHILE Whit Berry laid an arm fondly across the old rancher's shoulders and told him the facts which the Masked Rider had uncovered, the lights came back on in Trapp's Bar and white-faced townspeople started wandering inquisitively toward the jail. As Cap

Maxwell continued to listen and gape in unbelief, he stopped wondering about the disappearance of Wayne Morgan and decided the dark-haired waddy had in some mysterious way brought things to a climax in Moonstone Valley in less than two days, and then left the details to the Masked Rider.

Glistening tears shone in his mild eyes as the old rancher realized that the Weeping Woman Mine had proved successful after four years.

It had brought death to many, but there were still many lives which it could enrich with happiness.

"And the Masked Rider is goin' to share in that mine just like the other stockholders," Maxwell declared happily. He turned to speak to the black-clad man who had stood behind him, and then he blinked in surprise. Aside from the handful of curious spectators who were now crowding around him, the streets of Cactus were deserted.

"I reckon he's ridin' on," Maxwell said then. "Him and the redskin. But that's just as well. Somewhere there's a man that is havin' trouble just like I was. The Masked Rider and his Indian pard will ride this way one day, and he'll have help he never knowed about. Still it don't seem right that they won't take no pay."

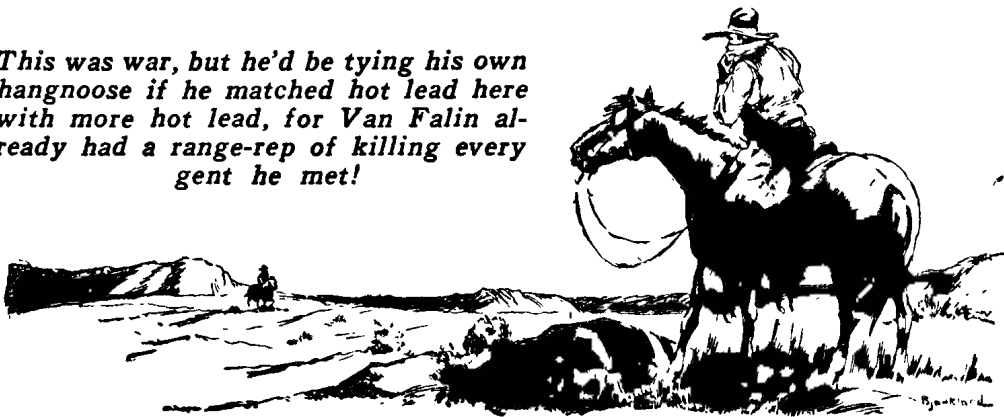
Cap Maxwell had no way of knowing that the wide smile on his leathery face as he gazed off into the darkness was as rich as gold!



The Kid They Called A Killer

SMASH NOVELET by HASCAL GILES

This was war, but he'd be tying his own hangnoose if he matched hot lead here with more hot lead, for Van Falin already had a range-rep of killing every gent he met!



CHAPTER I

RIDE THE MAN DOWN

BLOOD splattered down from the half-loft of the weathered line shack and fell in a warm splotch on the back of Van Falin's gloved hand as he stood silently in the center of the floor and cast his eyes around for a place to hide. The sight of it made him shiver despite the warm tingle of excitement inside him. He flung a hasty glance above him and whistled in horror as he saw the widening circle of crimson on the overhead bunk, another dark drop forming between the narrow cracks in the ceiling.

A quick glance through the dirty window told him he had no time to investigate the loft. Whatever was up there could wait; but the advancing ring of angry cowmen outside could not. For the past ten minutes he had seen them moving in, skipping for cover, drawing nearer and nearer—ten enraged, gun-hung fighting men who were holding him directly responsible for the death of Orebanks' sheriff, Alf Hooker, and for the mysterious disappearance of Lin Johnson who carried five thousand dollars of the ranchers' money.

Thirty yards away, Van saw a large black sombrero pop up from the chaparral and he recognized it as belonging to

Big Lafe Belkins. A moment later, the hulking rancher leaped from cover and ran a few steps forward, his red-checked shirt making an easy target in the late Texas sunshine. Now Van knew who was leading the band as the others followed close on Big Lafe's heels. And he knew why.

Big Lafe was out there spurring the men on, piling up new charges against Van Falin and whipping the men into a murderous furry with his deep, booming voice which had the power to take men under its control by its bellowing volume if for no other reason. The reason Big Lafe Belkins was doing this was because he hated Van Falin with the force which only a prejudiced man can hate—hated him because a few months ago Van had been fighting with the Federals while Orebanks' men fought on the Confederate side, hated him because he had the nerve to take over the Rocking F ranch which was owned by his uncle before he was killed at Vicksburg, hated him because Lin Johnson slept in Van's room the night he had disappeared.

Van's first impulse was to snap a shot at the big man when he broke into the open, but he passed up the opportunity and gave himself a mental berating for leaving his father's spread in Montana to run the Rocking F. There was nothing left of the ranch

after the war. While Orebank's better citizens had taken up arms to fight with Lee, the weak and cruel and greedy had stayed home to pursue a more profitable course. Rustling, looting and robbing was an unhampered occupation with few men left on the range to protect their property. After the surrender, ranchers came back to grown-over ranges, clogged water holes and empty corrals.

THE deadly whine of a rifle bullet cut short Van's self-styled browbeating and the short chunky cowboy hit the floor a moment after the slug shattered the window pane and thudded angrily into the logs of the opposite wall. Van did not answer the shot. Circumstantial evidence was already heavy against him. If he killed one of the ranchers he knew he'd be tying his own hangnoose.

Something warm splashed on the back of Van's neck and his mind was jerked back to the eerie loft above. Another shot tore into the cabin wall, this time from a six-gun, and Van knew the men were closer. But now his mind was on something else and he ignored the increasing gunfire as he crawled toward the ladder in the corner of the room. His ears caught a faint groan of pain as he started to climb and he knew there was a wounded man in the cabin as he had suspected at first.

Van blinked his eyes uncertainly in the increased dimness, then he saw the figure huddled on the straw in the center of the large bunk. Kneeling beside the unconscious form, he had to bend close to recognize the face.

"Ames Finley!" he grunted in surprise.

Van ripped the man's shirt off and looked at his wound, a clean bullet hole through his thin left shoulder. The puddle of blood beneath him was

the key to his unconsciousness. Working feverishly, the trapped cowboy formed a neat bandage from his neckerchief and put a stop to the wound's bleeding. Then he bathed Finley's face in the water left in his canteen. But not until he had found the whiskey flask in the man's back pocket and had forced a drink down him, did Ames show any signs of life. His eyes fluttered open for a moment and he moved his lips as if to speak. Then he became limp again.

The sound of the shooting died now and the silence made Van remember it for the first time since he had climbed into the loft. He knew rest was all that could help Ames Finley for a while, so he swung down to the cabin floor again. As he hit the floor, the front door burst open and Big Lafe Belkins rushed in.

Van swung his ham-like fist without thinking, catching Belkins on the point of his chin and tumbling him back before he had a chance to use the colt he had in his hand. Belkins' two hundred thirty pounds smacked against the two men crowding in behind him. All three of them went to their knees from the force of the blow. Van ducked nimbly as another rancher dived at him through the window. He slapped the man senseless with a swinging back-hand blow when he started to rise from the floor.

But his trouble increased as more possemen piled in through the doorway and circled around him as Big Lafe Belkins charged from the front with a bellow of rage.

Dodging a fist thrown at him from the left, Van took the full force of Big Lafe's first blow to his mouth. The salty taste of blood ran over his tongue as his lips flattened painfully against his teeth. Van fought like a madman after that! He lashed out with the toe of his boot, sank his foot into Big

Lafe's pulpy belly. Hopping around like a tumbleweed, he threw punches in every direction at once, always meeting a target as the numbers increased. He moved away deceptively to let one of his assailants take a blow aimed at him by Big Lafe.

Then Van Falin clipped the hefty leader on the ear with a bone-jarring jab with his left hand.

His eyes became swollen and blurred with blood within a minute and his mouth was numb from bruises. But he kept fighting until a hand grabbed his arms from behind, pinning them to his back. Big Lafe Belkins' clubby fist was on its way when this happened. It exploded like a rocket in Van's face and he sank to the floor amid a shower of stars and brain-pricking flashes of light.

When Van Falin regained consciousness, he was not surprised to find himself in jail. It was dark outside and Van was glad for that. He didn't believe his eyes could stand light, weak and painful as they were. He ran his his tongue over his lips and winced from the sting it left. Arising stiffly from his cot, he walked to the cell door and gazed thoughtfully at the sleeping deputy. There was something he wanted to ask Deputy Craig Sloan but his dimmed mind was slow in recalling it.

Finally, after going over the events at the cabin, he remembered.

At his call, Sloan rubbed sleep from his eyes and came slowly to his cell, still limping a little from a bullet-smashed knee suffered in the war. Sloan was a big man, blue-eyed with a shock of tousled blond hair. He was one of the two men whom Van had known in Orebank before he inherited his uncle's ranch. Ames Finley was the other. Van had never cared much for Finley, but he considered Craig Sloan his friend.

THE DEPUTY tugged whimsically at the lobe of his ear and grinned a slow grin. "You sure are a sight for the undertaker," he drawled around the cud of chewing tobacco which he never parted with even in his short cat-naps. "That's where you almost came to rest, too, amigo. I had to do some tall talking to them ranchers before they'd let me lock you up. Big Lafe Belkins was all for weighin' you at the end of a rope. Finally I got you in my keeping by telling them it'd be too easy on you going out while you was still unconscious!"

Van tried to grin at Craig Sloan's attempt at humor. "What I woke you up to find out is, did Lafe and his men bring in Ames Finley?"

A questioning look spread over the deputy's long face. "Bring him in from where?" he asked. "The last time I saw him he was at the meeting the other night when you fellers agreed on his suggestion to take up a collection and send Lin Johnson up north to buy some new breed stock."

"Then you better go out and get him yourself, Craig. He's out in the loft of that old line shack on the east range and he's shot."

The deputy's face colored with anger at mention of Finley and Van knew he was remembering an old battle on the banks of the lower Mississippi. Van's company had been short of men and hard-pressed. Sloan and Findley had been wounded. The lanky deputy's punctured knee had only served to make him fight harder; but Ames Finley had demanded to be taken to the field hospital. A few days later he obtained a medical discharge and went home. He never returned, prolonging his exaggerated illness until the war was won. The men in camp had mentioned his name only in curses after that. Curses on a yellow dog.

Craig Sloan looked hard at Van for a moment and said: "You didn't shoot

him, too—did you, Van?”

The square-shouldered little cowboy behind the bars snorted angrily. He had heard so many accusations directed at him in the last few hours that his temper had reached a boiling point. “Holy Smokes! You don’t think I’m going around killing everybody I meet, do you?”

“No,” Sloan replied. “I don’t believe you’ve killed anybody. But I would like to know how everything points so straight to you.”

“Nobody’s even asked me to explain,” Van said bitterly. “It was like this: After the meeting, Lin Johnson and me took a room together in the hotel. About two o’clock Lin woke me up and said somebody downstairs was yelling for him. He took my gun with him in case it was some kind of trick. I was about half asleep when I heard a couple of shots and the sound of a horse pounding out of town. Naturally, I grabbed my spare colt and ran down to see what was coming off. The sheriff was outside dead, so I took out in search of the killer. I was still out there this afternoon when Belkins and his men sneaked up on me, accused me of all the dirty work and started slinging lead. I gave ’em the slip, but they finally caught up with me.”

Craig Sloan stared thoughtfully at the floor for a moment. At last he said, “I believe you’re telling the truth, Van. But I still can’t make nothing of it. I’ll mull over it while I go out and get that yellow-livered Finley. He’d be safe there till morning, though, because people like him don’t die.”

“If you’re talking about me, you won’t have to go to no trouble,” Ames Finley said from the doorway. He had pushed in unnoticed and stood leaning against the wall, the lamplight gleaming on his naked shoulders. The wounded man had used the remainder of his shirt to form a sling for his left arm.

“How’d you get here,” Craig Sloan asked curiously. “From what Van told me I thought you was bad hurt.”

Finley’s face was drawn and haggard, his eyes dulled from pain. But he put on a rough front now that he knew medical aid was near. “Just a scratch,” he scoffed. “I found a horse picketted near the cabin and I rode him in. Somebody told me it belonged to Van Falin, so it must’ve been him that helped me today.” He shifted his eyes to the cowboy and said, “Much obliged, Falin.”

CHAPTER II

MOB LAW

VAN nodded in understanding and the skinny, dark-haired man turned to leave. He stopped when Craig Sloan moved away from the cell, asking him a question.

“How’d you get that slug in your shoulder,” Sloan asked suspiciously. “Since I’m the only law around here now, I’d kind of like to keep count of the powder being burned around Orebank.”

Finley’s thin mustache seemed to darken in contrast to the change of color in his naturally pale face. Then he leaned close to Craig, spoke in a confidential tone which Van was barely able to hear. “I was planning on working this out myself, but I guess I should tell you. I was doing my best to help Van out of this jam. You see, I was on the same side as you fellows during the war and I think we should stick together in this thing—”

“Get to the point,” the deputy interrupted. “The war’s over now and I’m tired hearing about it. I’ll admit that’s one of the big things Lafe Belkins holds against Van. If you or me had made a

mis-step he'd be yelling Yankee devil at us, too."

"That's what I'm driving at," Ames Finley continued in his silky tones. "I believe Big Lafe is using his dislike for Falin to cover up his own dirty work. This morning I picked up a trail of two horses. One looked like it was carrying double and it led toward Big Lafe's spread. A half mile from his place, two masked men came out of the brush after me. A bullet winged me in the shoulder and that's all I remember until I came to in the loft of that cabin."

Craig Sloan's eyes widened in surprise when Ames Finley had finished his explanation and the slow-moving deputy motioned the man on his way without comment. Then he went back to his chair, put his feet on the desk, and prepared to rest his mind in sleep. Things were getting too complicated for him.

Van's own mind was too troubled even to attempt sleep. He knew he was spending his last night in jail. Unless something was done, he was spending his last night anywhere. By morning the ranchers would be filled with lust for his life. Big Lafe Belkins would see to that. And his death would be a symbol, a symbol that the war was not won. It would mean that any northerner who came to Orebank to seek a livelihood would suffer from the example. A newcomer would be considered a Yankee, not an American with the right to live where he chose. To prove this right gave Van Falin a new incentive to fight back.

But there was more to the fight than a war-born prejudice. Sheriff Alf Hooker had been killed and Van's six-gun had been found near his body. The night before that, Orebank's leading ranchers had held a meeting, drawn notes on their spreads and pooled the money to buy new breed stock. Lin Johnson was designated to make the

purchase. Van was the last to see him before he disappeared from the hotel room which they had shared in town. It was easy to understand the ranchers' suspicions of him.

There were other parts to the puzzle. Only one bullet was found in Alf Hooker's heart. Van was positive he heard two shots and the lawman's holster was empty when he was found. Who was to profit from the present mix-up, Van wondered. Had Lin Johnson deliberately fled with the money? Or did Big Lafe Belkins hold cards in the deal?

Van found himself pondering over the story Ames Finley had told. Big Lafe had more money and more range than any man in Orebank, Van knew. Twice he had offered to buy the Rocking F, hoping to get rid of his Yankee neighbor. Could he be Lin Johnson's kidnapper? If he was, most of the other ranchers would go broke. Big Lafe could wait until the notes came due, buy them from the bank and own interest in half the ranches in Orebank. But Ames Finley had money, too. In addition to his spread north of town, Finley owned the Jingle Spur Saloon, an enterprise which was always profitable.

The shuffling of Craig Sloan's feet on the desk top brought Van's thoughts back to his own predicament. The long-legged deputy sat up suddenly, wide awake. He cocked his ear toward the window in a listening attitude. Loosening his twin colts in their holsters, he walked to the window and looked out, a worried frown darkening his face.

"They're coming, Van," he said over his shoulder. "I been expecting it for an hour."

Van caught the sound, now, an angry murmur far down the street and the stamping of many feet. He swallowed hard in an attempt to rid his throat of the sudden tight feeling which seemed to be choking him. His heart began to skip madly and the cowboy didn't try

to tell himself that he wasn't scared. He'd seen mobs work before and he had no desire to be the victim of the fate which they dealt.

"What are you going to do, Craig," Van asked softly, hiding his nervousness.

"Nothing," the deputy replied, looking at the floor when he answered rather than face the cold, contemptuous eyes of his prisoner. "There's nothing I can do, Van," he continued hastily as if he were arguing with himself.

CRAIG leaned against Van's cell, his eyes flitting from the cowboy inside to the waving torches which could be seen through the window. He seemed to be measuring the odds in this deadly game. But Van Falin did not give him time to reach any further decision. Catching the lawman off guard, Van grabbed the man's head from behind and yanked it back against the bars. Craig Sloan wilted to the floor like an icicle in a branding fire.

The mob was closer now, and Van could hear the curses of the men as they reviewed aloud the charges against him. Sweat popped out on his ruddy face as he reached through the bars and tore recklessly at the deputy's pockets in search for the keys. He finally found them in the man's vest and then spent another precious five seconds fumbling for the one that would unlock his cell. When he found it and stepped free, his heart took on a sinking sensation as he realized he'd been too late. Boots were already pounding up the front steps.

He ran down the short corridor to the rear door, grabbing his colt from the peg on the wall as he went. As he slid the bolt back, the door pushed inward, smacked him in the face. Before he could overcome the surprise at finding himself surrounded, something hard pressed his stomach and a lanky, squint-

eyed hombre with sideburns said, "Drop it, mister!"

Van knew surrender would gain him nothing and he refused to let the number bluff him. Swinging his colt-hand sharply upward he heard the gunman's wrist crack as the six-gun sailed out of his hand. The man yelled in pain and Van dived for the door. Guns and fists slashed down at him, leaving cuts and bruises all over him as he plowed toward the outside. As his feet hit the sand of the alley, a volley of lead tore into the earth about him. Van whirled desperately and snapped three quick shots into the walls above the mob. They melted back to seek cover and Van started to run for his life.

A horseman skidded around the corner of the building then and the cowboy knew escape was hopeless. The whistle of a rope cut the air and Van tried to hit the ground. He was caught in mid-air by invisible force and held there as the hungry noose bit into his body. He gritted his teeth in pain as the rider galloped past him, the rope throwing him down and dragging him along the stone-studded earth. By the time the horse slid to a halt, Van was praying for unconsciousness to relieve the pain of his torn and bleeding body.

A yell from the sheriff's office was evidence that relief was not far away. The relief of death! Men crowded around him. Angry hands jerked him to his feet and he made no move to resist them as they bound him and hoisted him roughly into a saddle. Van saw Big Lafe Belkins for the first time as the giant rancher tossed a hangnoose over his head and settled it around his neck, slapped the horse's rump and started down the street toward the cottonwood grove at the end of town. Big Lafe was determined to make sure of the job because he held stubbornly to the other end of the rope all the way. When the tree was reached, it was he who draped

the rope across the limb and made it fast to the trunk.

The task completed, Big Lafe stood back from Van's mount and said, "You got anything to say, Falin?"

For a moment the growling, jeering mob grew silent, waiting for the doomed man's last words. Van was no longer scared. There was nothing except boiling, helpless anger in his eyes as his burning gaze swept over the upturned faces.

Falin had nothing to say and the knotted muscles in his set jaws told them so.

Then someone spoke for him!

"Untie that rope, Belkins," said a hard, drawling voice from the darkness. "Cut him down or I'll cut you down with lead."

Refusing to believe their ears, the mob turned as one man. A lone rider sat twenty yards away astride a sturdy black stallion. His white sombrero was pulled low over his eyes, a mask covered most of his face. But the nickel-plated colt which he held in each hand was in plain view and the fingers looked tight on the triggers.

Belkins and the others were too surprised to go for their guns. Van felt the rope grow loose and he dug his heels into the pony's flanks, guiding it toward his benefactor with his knees. The masked gunman emptied his right hand colt above the crowd's head and then loped away with Van Falin close on his heels.

He slowed down enough to reach over and jerk the loop which was holding Van's hands behind his back and then they both rode faster as Van grabbed the pony's reins.

A bullet tugged at Van's shirt sleeve as the men behind them got their guns in action. Other shots boomed before Van and the rider were swallowed up by the prairie to escape the range of the flying lead.

CHAPTER III

FRAME-UP

OUTSIDE the town, they stretched their mounts into a long lope, doubled sharply to the north and headed for the badlands. Van looked curiously at the man beside him and grinned happily as the rider ripped his mask off to disclose the jutting jaw and crinkled eyes of Deputy Craig Sloan.

Van signaled for a halt when the sound of pursuing hoofbeats which had been following them subsided. "You're sticking your neck out for trouble, Craig," Van said huskily. "No use in both of us getting in wrong with this town, so you'd better hightail it back before they find out who stole their prisoner."

Sloan munched his cud and squirted a stream of tobacco juice into the darkness. "I ain't forgetting the time you crawled out to get me when I was wounded in battle, Van. Anyway, there's no use me holding on to a badge when Big Lafe and the others start taking the law into their own hands."

"If that's the way you feel, I'm glad it's me you're sticking by," Van declared as he tightened his grip on the reins. "Let's get going."

"We ain't riding into the badlands," Sloan said as the cowboy moved toward the shadowy clumps of lava ahead. "That's the very place the ranchers will be searching for us in the morning. We're going to your ranch instead."

Van was too bruised and battered to argue. His aching body was groaning for rest and he could think of no place he'd rather be than in his own bed. As he wheeled his horse and followed the lawman, his mind was still searching through a blinding fog for the cause of

all the punishment which he had taken.

When they rode into the Rocking F ranchyard, Van Falin was asleep in the saddle, his head lolling against his chest. Craig Sloan woke him dragging him out of the saddle. Van summoned his last store of strength to walk to the door of the house.

"I got to get you patched up and to bed," Craig mumbled in his ear. "We'll have to pull out of here by morning."

Van leaned weakly against the wall of the house while Craig Sloan fumbled with the latch. The door was unlocked, Van knew, and he wondered vaguely why the deputy was having so much trouble. Then Sloan put his shoulder to the door and shoved it open and Van saw what was holding it. The body of a man was piled against it!

Stepping over the crumpled form they squeezed inside and Van waited breathlessly for the lawman to light the lamp. The sound of Sloan's thumbnail scratch of the match was loud in the ghostly silence of the room. The flame flared in his hand and then flickered out before Van could focus his bleary vision on the form at his feet. He heard the rustle of the lawman's clothes as he fumbled for another match. This time he got the lamp lit and both men sucked in their breath in a sharp wheeze of unbelief at what they saw.

Lin Johnson lay there in the hall of the Rocking F ranchhouse, his flowing white hair and grizzled mustache matted with blood from the hole in his skull which was the size and shape of the butt of a sixgun.

Anger brought new strength to Van Falin's veins as he tore his eyes away from the dead man and faced Craig Sloan. The lawman's eyes were boring into the cowboy's face, hard and unreadable.

"Go ahead and say it," Van snapped in disgust. "Accuse me of this, too."

"Shut up," Craig Sloan said. "I'm thinking and it ain't about you. Somebody has made the mistake that anybody with two good eyes could read through without halfway trying. The frame-up that somebody is trying to plant on you is just a little too evident. No guilty person could make that many mistakes."

Van breathed a sigh of relief and felt thankful that there was at least one man in Orebank who was still using his power to think. Together they rolled the body over and examined the contents of the man's pockets. They found Lin Johnson's watch, his wallet, some old letters and his money belt. The five thousand dollars was missing.

AFTER they had given up hope, Craig Sloan said, "I think I'll ride back to Orebank and assume my official duties. You stay here till morning and then get under cover while I get things straightened out. I aim to arrest Lafe Belkins on what Ames Finley told us and see if I can get anything out of him."

Van nodded in understanding and walked over to his bunk and sprawled across the top of it. The gangling deputy lifted Lin Johnson's body from the floor and carried it outside to his horse, tied it behind his saddle and returned. Craig Sloan spent the next fifteen minutes heating water and washing Van Falin's numerous wounds before he put bandages on the worst of the cuts. Then he tossed a six-gun on the bunk beside the exhausted cowboy and headed back toward Orebank. The receding sound of his horse's hoofs barely crept into Van's sleep-drugged mind, sounding like part of a dream.

The lamp was still flaming in its wall socket and showering the room with waving shadows when Van Falin woke two hours later. Darkness crowded against the windows and a call from a

night bird drifted through the silence. Van had not slept long and he was glad he had wakened when he did. For his mind had not slept with his body and some inner sense had forced him into wakefulness with a sudden inspiring thought.

He began to think in a methodical way as he rubbed sleep from his swollen eyes. There was a thin trail of blood leading from the spot where Lin Johnson's body had lain to the back door of his house. But the trail did not lead from where the dead man's head had rested. The dark brown stains began farther away and Van suddenly grasped the thought which had awakened him. Whoever put Lin Johnson's body against the ranch house door had not left the same way. And the trail of blood indicated that the murderer had also been injured.

Despite the pain in his arms and legs, Van leaped from bed and hurried to the back porch where he sloshed water over his face to ease the stinging of his eyes. He had work to do and he had to act swiftly. Orebank had turned against him at the first chance, he remembered, because he had sympathized with the North during the war and because he had dared set himself up as their neighbor. Now Craig Sloan, the only friend he had left, was riding into Orebank with a dead man whose killing he could not explain. Perhaps the citizens would charge him with being a party to the crimes of which they had accused Van Falin. The prejudiced hate which they held for the people of the North would then be increased and it was this which Van had tried so hard to defeat since he had taken over his uncle's ranch.

Working with desperate haste, Van threw a saddle on a fresh horse from the skimpy corral and headed south toward Orebank. On the rolling knoll beyond the Rocking F boundary, Van pulled his horse to a halt for a moment

and looked at the sky to judge the time. The stars in the west were still sparkling in the hazy ring left by the setting moon and the cowboy knew he had three or four hours in which to work before sunrise. An interval of misgiving crept into his thoughts as he sat there and a shiver of uneasiness went down his spine. It had been such a short time since he had barely escaped the call of death and now he was riding back to flirt with fate again. He wondered if the goal for which he was fighting was worth the price.

A snort from his pony made him conscious of other life on the vast prairie about him and his thoughts took a new course. All around him the grass grew to his pony's knees and farther off a grove of jackpines waved their needles in an endless salute to the straying breeze. There was only one thing wrong with the landscape, Van decided. The grass was giving its life to nothing and the jackpines were spreading a shading canopy over barren earth. Cattle was the missing factor. A land which was created for livestock whose earliest owners had fought and died that they might have land for their herds was now empty of all life except a man and a horse.

VAN clucked his mount into action and rode on, a new determination turning his eyes cold and his face into a hard mask. A single, nervous gesture from his restless mount had given the cowboy a new slant on the situation. It was not for himself that he was fighting; it was for the nation as a whole and for the ranchers in Orebank. The unjust charges against him were delaying the plans which they had originally mapped out. Not a step had been taken toward the solution of their greatest problem which was to rebuild their ranches. Thousands of people in the East were begging for more food and

more leather, the production of which had almost reached a halt during the war. Every second wasted by the men in Orebank increased the crisis which was facing the country. Van determined to put a stop to the underhanded tactics of someone in Orebank who was responsible for the turmoil which was now keeping the ranchers from their work.

The Rocking F needed stock and riders. Fences had to be repaired and water holes had to be cleaned. Van was eager to get busy at these tasks and he knew it was impossible to complete them as long as he was dodging the vigilante committee and hiding from a hangnoose. Before he could do these things the real instigator of all the trouble in Orebank would have to be found and dealt with.

Van gave the bronc its head for a moment and inspected the loads in the sixgun which Craig Sloan had given him. He snapped the cylinder back in place with deadly purpose, placed the gun loosely in the holster at a handy angle, and urged the horse to a faster pace. Van had spent enough time running. Now he was ready to take the offensive and, if necessary, do a little lead slinging in his own behalf. Before the sun set on a new day, he was going to have Orebank's traitor in jail—or ready for boothill!

It was comparatively quiet in Orebank when Van Falin rode cautiously into the shadows of the outermost building. At the cottonwood grove where Big Lafe Belkins and the ranchers had tried to hang him, Van ground-tied his horse and continued on foot. Only two buildings still showed lights and these were far apart. Walking on the balls of his feet to still the rattle of his spurs, the cowboy turned left a block before he reached the glowing windows of the Jingle Spur Saloon, sneaked through the alley behind the jail and came out in

front of the bank.

Here he stopped a while and studied the street. A man stumbled out of the saloon far to his right and struggled aboard his waiting bronc. As he rode drunkenly out of town, Van drew back into the darkness until he was out of sight. A quick glance up either side of the street revealed it to be empty after that and Van hurried quietly across to the bank. Keeping close to the protecting walls, he edged around to the back door.

Sturdy steel bars made dark lines across the glass, rendering it impossible for a man to enter there. But Van had been inside enough to know that a single night latch secured it. Drawing his six-gun, he tapped the corner of the pane with the bone handle and listened breathlessly for an alarm as the glass crashed to the floor with a musical tinkle, leaving an opening large enough for his hand to pass through.

A moment later he reached inside, turned the latch and entered unchallenged. Van ran to Banker Hudson's desk and clawed through the books and records which Hudson never bothered to store in the safe. The cowboy worked with feverish haste, casting worried looks about him.

Every creak of the building made him jump. His nerves tingled with tenseness. If he was found here it would be the end for him. The ranchers would make sure of their next necktie party. Van was not interested in money; he had no intentions of robbing the safe. He was after something more valuable than double eagles. But, if caught, his motives would not be questioned. The fact that he was there would be enough.

Finally he found it. Van lay under a table on the floor and concealed his lighted match with his hat while he hastily scanned the record of deposits. Smiling with satisfaction, he replaced the book on the desk and crept out.

CHAPTER IV

EARLY MORNING SHOWDOWN

THIS time Van did not hide in the shadows. When he gained the boardwalk, he straightened to his full height and strode openly down the street. Halfway to the Jingle Spur Saloon, he drew his colt, twirled the cylinder to insure its working order and then continued.

Without slowing his stride, Van Falin breasted calmly through the batwings of the Jingle Spur Saloon and halted on the threshold, legs widespread.

Ames Finley and bearded, fat-faced Mort Farley, the barkeeper, were the only occupants. Mort Farley was washing glasses, Finley leaned against the end of the counter.

Finley straightened like a springboard when Van burst into the room. His left arm was still in a sling; but his right slid toward the pearl-handled gun riding low on his leg.

"We're—we're closed, Falin," Finley said at last.

"I ain't drinking, Ames," Van returned softly. "So you won't have to open up specially for me. I just want to talk to you."

Ames Finley looked worried. "For gosh sakes, Falin, you ain't got no time to talk. This whole town's looking for you. You'd better be riding—fast!"

Van walked closer to Finley, his bootheels loud in the silence. "I got all the time in the world, Ames," Van answered. "But I'm afraid you ain't."

"What do you mean?" Finley chuckled. "Nobody's chasing me."

Van's face colored suddenly as Finley's remark dug into him. "There'll be a new charge against me after tonight, Ames. I just broke into the bank. What I found there might interest you."

"If you want to cut me in so I'll pro-

tect you," Finley said, "I don't believe I'm interested."

The cowboy grinned coldly. "There's nothing to divvy except figures. Five thousand dollars marked beside your name the day after Lin Johnson disappeared. All your other deposits run around fifteen hundred and two thousand. I don't believe business was as good as that last week!"

Van Falin's words wiped the grin off Ames Finley's handsome face. The bartender also discerned the veiled accusation and as Finley reached for his colt, Mort Farley dived beneath the bar and came up with a shotgun.

Anticipating the results of his remark, Van Falin was faster than either of them. His colt was menacing the pair before their trigger fingers could coil. "I'd just as soon shoot it out as not," Van said grimly. "Do you want to drop 'em or . . ."

The clatter of their weapons against the floor made it unnecessary for him to finish the sentence. "Now, Finley, we'll walk over to the jail and have a little tongue-wagging session with Craig Sloan," Van instructed softly.

The dapper little saloonman's strained smile came back to his face. "Sure, Falin. I want to see just what you think you can hang on me."

He turned to the rack over the back mirror and reached for his hat and coat. Van moved forward to cover any tricky moves, his colt aimed at Finley's back. That move was the cowboy's mistake. Ames Finley reached for his hat. He grasped the Stetson's wide brim and yanked downward. Van knew it was a trap when he saw the wooden prong on the rack swing down like a lever. But it was too late to do anything about it. The floor under his feet disappeared and he sank through the opening.

VAN thumped against the bottom of an eight-foot cellar, his gun fly-

ing from his grasp with the shock. Even as he hit, the cowboy's eyes swept around the underground room. Lamps lined the sides of the cellar, outlining the cases of whisky and beer stored there. Then, in a far corner, Van saw larger and more bulky bundles. Cowhides! And even at that distance, the cowboy could see evidence of many different brands. The mark of the Rocking F was outlined on a hide covering the top of one of the bundles!

Fuming with rage, Van looked about for his gun. A voice behind him halted his reaching motion when he found it.

"Don't move, hombre. It won't be healthy."

Two men stepped from behind a row of crates, six-guns leveled. Van recognized one of them as the thick-chested, pock-marked ruffian who had ridden him down when he tried to escape the mob behind the jail.

"Ames allus said some gunny would be standing on that trap door one day shooting his mouth off. Lucky he sent us down here to get some wine." The pock-marked man turned to his partner, laughed gruffly. A door to the stairway behind him opened and Ames Finley entered, strutting like a bantam.

"Look who's talking now, Falin," he smirked at Van. "The tide's turned."

Van watched the saloonman grin, and matched it with one of his own. "The tide turns twice, Ames. Coming and going." Van gestured with his thumb toward the bundles of cowhides in the corner. "I reckon if Lafe Belkins would take a look down here, he'd know where all the stock in Orebank went."

"Why do you think I wanted to get back home before you fellows?" Finley asked boldly. "You don't think that bullet scratch on my leg was really enough to keep me out of the war?"

Motioning for his men to tie Van's hands, Ames Finley continued with his open confession—evidence that plans

for Van's death were already complete within his mind.

"You're so sure I killed the sheriff and Lin Johnson," Finley drawled sarcastically, "maybe you can tell me how I did it."

"Stop me if I'm wrong," Van snapped. "You kept me too busy defending myself to think for a while, Ames, but I've done a lot of it in the last few hours. Hooker's death wasn't in your plans at first. You called Lin Johnson down to rob him. He recognized you and shot you with my gun. Sheriff Hooker happened by and saw what happened. You shot him with your gun and left mine lying beside him after you'd busted Johnson's skull. Pinning it on me was the likely thing since I was none too popular here. The posse that was after me scared you into the line shack where I found you and you cooked up a story about masked riders shooting you."

A look of momentary fear passed over the saloonman's face when Van finished his story.

"Get him outside and on a horse," Finley ordered. "We're riding into the hills and moving the rest of those mixed cattle across the border before Big Lafe Belkins starts snooping around that way. A nice little stampede across the Rio will make it look like Falin was moving the herd and got caught in it. Let's go."

Strapped across a rolling, joggling bronc, Van went through a new hell during the trip across the plain and into the hills above Ames Finley's ranch. It felt as if he had been travelling for days when they finally called a halt. A look at the sun told him it was only noon.

When they removed him from the horse's back and tied him to a juniper tree, Van could look down into a little spoon-shaped gorge and see the herd of bawling milling cattle held there.

Finley had done a thorough job. Stock from every ranch in Orebank was included in the herd.

Leaving the stoop-shouldered Zack to stand guard over their prisoner, Ames Finley and Tip side-stepped their broncs down the sloping wall of the gorge and rode down to greet the riders who were keeping check on the cattle. As Finley talked with his men below, Van saw them nod their heads and gesture toward the tree to which he was bound. At last Finley yelled to Zack to bring Van down to the outlaw's camp.

Van remained silent as the outlaw marched him to the floor of the gulley. It was halfway down the hill that the cowboy put his rapidly-formed plan into action. Van came to a sudden halt and Zack plowed roughly into his back, the sixgun ramming hard against his ribs. It was just what Van had hoped for. Before the gunman realized it was a trick, Van whirled and grabbed the man's gun arm. At the same time he threw his leg across Zack's path, gave the man a powerful tug which threw his feet from under him and tumbled him headfirst down the steep slope. Zack's fingers relaxed their grip on the sixgun and Van caught it in his own fist as the gunman fell.

Down below, Ames Finley sang out with a stream of curses and snapped a shot at the cowboy on the slope. Van leaped behind a stunted pine thicket as he felt the heat of Finley's bullet fan his cheek. Lead peppered into the brush and boulders about him like hail on a tin roof as the entire gang triggered fiercely in an attempt to smoke the cowboy from cover.

A SCREAMING slug ricocheted off a lava slab and slammed Van painfully to the ground as he sought a safer refuge. The bullet burned a deep crease along the point of the cowboy's jaw. Venturing a quick look above his new

barricade to size up the crowd, another shot showered Van's eyes with rock dust, leaving him almost blinded.

Van saw that his escape began to look hopeless. Before many more minutes elapsed, the outlaws would begin working a circle around him. Outnumbered and outflanked, he wouldn't stand a chance of coming through alive.

From the corner of his eye, Van saw their first attempt at such tactics. Zack and Tip jumped into view on his left as they sought cover higher on the canyon wall. Van threw two hasty shots at the pair and grinned with satisfaction when the thin, stoop-shouldered hombre stumbled two steps farther and then plowed his head into the ground, blood spurting from a hole in his side. His tall, big-shouldered partner, Tip, retreated back to the protection of the frightened cattle below.

Suddenly then Van had an idea. Putting his back against the ground, he shoved his feet against the boulder in front of him and pushed with all his strength. The rock moved slightly in its nest of soil, making a sucking noise as it tore loose from the earth. He rested a moment and then tried again, moving the boulder forward another inch.

He braced, prepared to use his utmost strength. Suddenly his right leg grew weak. A hot searing pain ran through his thigh as one of Ames Finley's slugs found its mark.

Van knew it was now or never. Gritting his teeth against the throbbing ache in his thigh, he set his legs against the rock and heaved with all his might. Then the pressure relaxed as the stone gave way and crashed down toward the floor of the canyon taking with it all the smaller shrubs and rocks which stood in its path. Van struggled weakly to a sitting posture which enabled him to watch the rock take a final leap into the air and then roar down into the outlaws' camp.

The cattle were wild in an instant, a tumbling, running mass of terrorized animals. Yells of terror rent the air as the bedlam increased below and the men fled rapidly in an attempt to escape the onslaught of the cutting hoofs and crushing bodies. Some of them went down; others found cover. But Van had lost interest in them. He was looking for only one man.

A wild-eyed steer tore along the edge of the herd, his horns swinging from side to side in torment. It was then that Van sighted his prey. The steer caught Ames Finley on the point of the razor-sharp horns and cast him aside like a fly. The white-faced saloonman still had strength left to crawl into the brush and escape the death that was close behind.

It was there that Van found him after the frightened herd had escaped to the

open prairie. He was no longer the cocky, neatly clothed businessman. His face was matted with sweat and dust and blood; his broadcloth suit was torn to shreds and his fine white hat was missing from his tangled hair.

WITHOUT speaking, Van dragged him to his feet and forced him to the broncs waiting above the gulley. And as they rode away this time, it was Van Falin who sat high in the saddle while Ames Finley hung limply across the bronc behind, bound hand and foot.

When the strange-looking pair rode into Orebank just before sunset, Craig Sloan almost swallowed his cud of chewing tobacco in laughter. But as Van hearded his prisoner into the jail and told the deputy of Ames Finley's confessions and of the herd in the hills, their revelry was cut short by a bellow from the rear cell.

Big Lafe Belkins tore at the bars with his massive hands and cursed Craig Sloan to Mexico and back. "You bat-eyed, skunk-haired, tobacco-chewing sidewinder. Do you still think I'm guilty?" The heavy-jowled rancher's face purpled with rage as the deputy unlocked the door. Craig Sloan cowered aside as Big Lafe stomped into the office.

Van started to move out of the doorway to let Belkins pass. But Big Lafe's coarse hand on his shoulder stopped him. "Well, Falin," he beamed, "I thought that iron-jawed Sloan would never let me at you. Let me be the first to shake yore hand." He grasped the cowboy's hand in a firm grip for a moment and then strode outside, a wide smile on his flat face.

For the first time in many months, Van remembered how he had felt when General Ulysses S. Grant had cited him for his conduct in action at Gettysburg. Shaking Big Lafe's hand made him feel the same way.

CONSIDER THE HORSE



LUCY'S ADVICE made no sense at all to Johnny

till he looked at himself from the pinto's viewpoint

by HASCAL GILES

JOHNNY SAIN could lift a horse. He tried it the first time in Crowfoot Flats, the little cow-country trade center where he had grown up and had been almost forgotten after a five-year absence. The day Johnny rode into town and told a crowd loitering around the blacksmith shop that he could hoist a horse off the ground singlehanded, a man looked at him and said, "I'll bet you twenty to ten you can't do it, cowboy."

Johnny took the bet, and he took the man's money; and after that he got to thinking that people anywhere would give him the same odds. Most places he went they'd heard of Johnny Sain, and this made the grin spread wider across his long, melancholy face and added a swagger to his long-legged, easy-swinging walk. It also made it easier for Johnny to find someone willing to bet a sizable roll he couldn't do what advance notices claimed he could, and Johnny always rode away somewhat richer for his trouble.

Wherever he stopped, Johnny used the same approach to the inevitable climax.

He used it in Claybank. It was about five o'clock on a Saturday afternoon when Johnny came slow-walking his pinto out of the rolling foothills and down the wagon-rutted main street that parted the weatherbeaten buildings of the business district.

Cowboys and miners lolled in conversing knots around the bars and livery stable, and Johnny saw right away that the busiest spot in town was the Chinook Saloon. He kneeed the pinto that way, pulled up quite inconspicuously at the hitching rail and waited to be noticed. A tall, lean man with squinted black eyes looked over his shoulder at him. Johnny pushed his high-peaked black hat back on his sandy hair and grinned.

"I can lift this horse," Johnny said.

The man's jaw crunched rhythmically half a dozen times and he spat casually into the dust a few feet from Johnny's horse. Afterward, he turned back to the quartet of overalled men with whom he'd been talking.

"I'd bet you a week's pay I could do it, mister," Johnny said.



The squint-eyed man nudged one of the big-hatted men next to him and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "I'd guess he's loco, Sebe. What do you think?"

They talked about Johnny among themselves for a few minutes. Finally they came down off the boardwalk and stood near him, joshing him. It was the way Johnny wanted it, and he just sat high in the saddle and grinned at them. When the guffaws and insults began to irritate him at last, Johnny reached into the waistband of his levis and came up with a handful of bills.

"I said I'd bet on it."

There was considerable argument for a while, but someone finally stepped forward to suggest that he hold the bets and give Johnny an opportunity either to lose his money or win theirs. Johnny didn't rush into it. He kept them talking until some of the odds reached three to one, and then he slid into the dust beside his horse and stomped around a little to work the kinks out of his legs.

"I ain't aiming to lift him sky high, understand," Johnny cautioned. "But soon as all four of this pinto's hoofs are out of the dirt, I aim to collect."

The crowd around Johnny had grown now, and somewhere in the milling group a man laughed heartily. Johnny grinned at all of them in general, bent down and walked under his horse. He shifted from side to side a time or two, measuring the distance between forelegs and flanks, and then he shoved his back into the pinto's belly.

Johnny Sain was not a big man, as Montana men go, but he was fairly tall with long, tenuous muscles ripping over his solid frame and he had the range rider's grace and coordination in his movements. But even this was not enough to accomplish what Johnny was trying here. It took knack and know-how, and special training. Johnny had all this, too.

As he braced his arms against his wiry thighs and heaved, Johnny's face turned the color of a hanging man, and heavy blue veins popped out on his corded neck. He stayed that way for what seemed eternity

before he gave an almost imperceptible twitch of his hips, and the pinto's four legs rose barely above the red clay dirt of the street. Johnny held the horse that way for a full five seconds, waiting for it to flail its hoofs. When this finally happened, he dropped suddenly to the dirt on his all-fours and stayed there for a moment, his head drooping between his quivering arms and his chest heaving.

It was quiet in the street, as if a public prayer service were going on. Johnny crawled shakily out from under the pinto, straightened and walked over to the stocky, bald man who had held the money.

"Looks like I won," he grinned.

"Looks like that's right," the bald man said. He handed Johnny the wad of bills, keeping his eyes on the newcomer's face. "I'm Adam Burke, friend," he said, grasping Johnny's hand. "I'm thinkin' you're about the most man I ever seen in one piece."

Adam Burke's words turned loose a torrent on Johnny. Men pushed up to him to shake his hand. Others mauled him on the back and praised his strength. Will Combs, the squint-eyed man, said he would give a hundred dollars to see him lift the horse one more time, but Johnny shook his head.

"I've never lifted him more than one time a day," Johnny said. "He doesn't like it, and I know I wouldn't."

This gave the crowd an excuse to guffaw again, and the men laughed big and loud. They said Johnny Sain was a man to ride the river with and that he was all right. When the furor died momentarily, a voice spoke from behind the crowd. If it hadn't been a girl's voice, Johnny never would have looked around. But he did, and a small aisle opened up between the men so Johnny could get a good look at her.

She stood there like an Indian ready for a scalping. Her hands were on her hips, and her legs, clad in tight-fitting buckskins, were braced wide as if she were looking for a fight.

All this passed over Johnny's vision rather quickly, but he saw she had flaming red hair, and the way it tumbled down in shimmering curls over her green riding

blouse held his eye. He had red hair, and he knew his temperament, and he knew he ought to ignore her. But he didn't have a heart-shaped face with a dimpled chin or long-lashed green eyes, and he could never do quite so much for an ordinary riding habit as did her own full curves.

While Johnny stared boldly, she said, "You heard me, cowboy. I said what's wrong with Claybank now is we've got too many clowns and not enough men. I wouldn't give a plugged nickel to see you lift that horse again."

Johnny Sain's face turned red. He opened his mouth to speak, but the girl didn't give him a chance. She rushed forward and stopped right in front of him, her face thrust up so she could look at him. "You probably think you're about the biggest thing on two legs. A big, strong man. Huh! I'll bet you haven't done a day's work in a year!"

Johnny's face turned redder from the sting of truth in her words. He had left Crowfoot Flats exactly fourteen months ago, working eastward into Kansas, on into Idaho and back up to Claybank. He had more greenback in his moneybelt now than a cowboy would earn in a year, and twice that much in a Butte bank. But he couldn't tell a complete stranger his whole pedigree, and besides, he did not want to argue with her. He had a feeling she had never lost an argument.

Despite his melancholy blue eyes and his doleful grin, Johnny Sain was no tenderfoot when it came to sizing up people. He figured the girl had more bothering her than a nasty disposition when she set out to insult a strange man so thoroughly.

BEFORE Johnny realized what was happening, his left cheek felt like it was full of bee stings, and he involuntarily clapped his palm to it. The girl, goaded into fury by her own words, had slapped him. She looked as if she might try it again at any moment.

"There," she shouted. "And even if I were a man you wouldn't dare hit me back. That's what I think of your horse-lifting."

Johnny Sain had his patience, and that

patience had its limit. His long left arm flicked outward, and warm flesh yielded under his thin fingers as they closed on the girl's shoulder. She had humiliated him in front of these men who had hailed him as a hero, and he deserved reparation. He meant to throw her across his pinto's saddle and give the seat of her buckskins a sound whacking. He meant to teach her that men were still men in Montana and that a woman didn't go about making men's talk.

He was reaching for her other shoulder when the girl lurched toward him, and Johnny felt a pricking pain run through his chest. He looked down. The girl held a gleaming bowie knife, and the point was biting into his skin.

"You take your hands off me or I'll—I'll—"

"Ma'am, I'd rather not go on with this," Johnny said shakily. Perspiration was dotting his knitted brow, and he hoped she wouldn't see it. "I'm sorry I got you so stirred up," he added, dropping his hand away and inching slowly backward.

With a deft movement of her wrist, the girl slid the knife back inside her blouse, and Johnny swallowed hard. "You won't work and you won't fight," she said. "I just wanted to prove a point."

Johnny felt trapped. He thought of two or three things to say, but finally ventured that he just hadn't been offered any jobs lately. That was the wrong thing to say.

"I've got a job for you," she replied, and there was a trace of a smile twitching the corners of her red lips. "But you can pass it up, and keep clowning if you want to. Most of your audience here has."

Johnny looked over her head at the men who had gathered around to see him prove he could lift a horse. He could read no help in their watchful faces.

"I'll take the job," he said.

The smile she had promised a moment before blossomed into full flavor now. Relief put a rightful youthfulness back into her eyes, and Johnny had the feeling he had done something good; and at the same time he had a feeling that he would regret it. She told him to meet her in half an hour

at New Farmer's livery barn, and walked quickly away from him, her gleaming hair swinging provocatively over her shoulders.

HER NAME was Lucy Dunlop, and she was the daughter of Ken Dunlop who had been buried three months ago on one of the grassy slopes of his Belt Buckle Ranch. The old rancher had lived a long and satisfying life and long before had repented a once expressed regret that his wife had not borne him a son before she died. He came to his end in a way that would have pleased him—at a poker table in the Chinook Saloon, with his boots on and a hole card good enough to claim the pot. For some time he had been confident that the Belt Buckle would be in capable hands when he went and that Lucy would never allow this monument to the Dunlop name to be absorbed by the greedy hands that had pestered him in his sunset years.

Four men had been riding for Ken when he died, but pleasant memories of him did not hold them when they decided to quit their jobs. It wasn't that they minded having Lucy, Ken's only heir, for a boss. She could ride and rope, bulldog a calf, or pop the head off a rattlesnake with a .45 Colt as well as they could.

But when a homesteader by the name of Fain Kerber drove his buckboard onto the boundary east of Crazy Creek and built himself a cabin and started plowing, the men began to worry. When, a few weeks later, another squatter started fencing part of the land next to the creek, the men started drifting away. Since then a third stranger had moved in on the creek, and most folks in Claybank thought they'd keep coming until half the graze and all the Belt Buckle water would be fenced in.

Johnny Sain heard all these things inside the Chinook Saloon, where he went for a drink with the men whose money he had won. He cursed them singly and collectively for not warning him before he told Lucy Dunlop he'd take the job, but the men just laughed at him. They did not like losing their money to a man who knew he was betting on a sure thing, and this was a way of squaring things with him.

On the way to the Belt Buckle, the red-haired cowboy kept at a polite distance behind the buckboard Lucy Dunlop was driving. He busied himself with his own thoughts while the miles passed behind them. Johnny had the feeling Lucy was laughing at his simplicity in falling for her challenge, and most of his thinking was of the things he should be saying to her about her tactics. But he kept his distance, and his silence. There would be a better opportunity to speak his mind.

The land reminded him somewhat of his own home—the rock and sand and red clay near Claybank, and then the tilting grasslands that led up in all directions to rolling knolls fringed with dark and fragrant cedars. Here and there he saw small bunches of cattle bearing the Belt Buckle brand, scattered and unattended.

It was almost dusk when they came up over a swell in the land and Johnny saw the ranch buildings ahead. A short, waddling figure moved about the back porch of the big L-shaped ranch house, and Johnny's sandy brows knitted in curiosity. When they arrived in the yard, he recognized the figure as a sturdy, sad-eyed Indian squaw.

"This is my cook, Woman-With-Eager-Hands," Lucy Dunlop said, speaking for the first time since they had left town. "We—I call her Handy."

Johnny touched his hat, grinning easily, and the old Crow woman's ebony eyes sparkled. "Me cook fine grub tonight," she grunted. She glanced at Lucy and then back at Johnny and said: "Shoot shotgun fine, too."

The veiled warning and the significance of her remark made Johnny chuckle. Lucy Dunlop silenced him with a fiery green-eyed glance and said: "Unload this where Handy tells you. You sleep in the bunkhouse, but you'll eat with us."

A CLANGING dinner gong brought Johnny out of his reverie, and he was grateful for the interruption. He had unloaded the wagon under the silent, gestured directions of Old Handy

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Johnny put his arm around Lucy's waist and pulled her toward him

and had thrown hay into the corral for his pinto and the three other horses he'd found there. Since then he'd been leaning against the top rail of the corral fence, chin on folded arms and his mind a hundred miles away and seven years in the past. Johnny had kept his mind free of thoughts of the past for two years, and he cursed the nostalgia aroused by these surroundings.

Johnny made himself the bright spot of the meal which they ate in the somber, high-ceilinged dining room of the old log house Ken Dunlop had built east of Crazy Creek forty years ago. He greeted Lucy with a mere nod, pretending not to notice she had changed the riding clothes and was now fresh and feminine in a tight-waisted gingham dress which rustled with her every movement. Most of his attention went to Handy, who, once the plates were filled, took her seat at the side of the long table and ate with all the delicate grace of a Denver school teacher.

Johnny told the Crow woman the food tasted like a prospector's cooking, but he kept piling it on his plate. He looked at Handy in surprise when she placed a whole apple pie in front of him, but he ate it down to the last crumb and thoroughly enjoyed it. When the meal was finished, Handy's coppery face shone like a mirror, and her eyes were filled with admiration for this grinning redhead who ate with more relish than a fighting chief.

Excusing himself, Johnny walked out into the gathering darkness and rolled a cigarette, savoring the fresh, sage-sweet air of the rangeland. Lucy Dunlop walked up beside him before the cigarette was half-finished. The swish of her skirt told of her coming before Johnny saw her, and the odd fragrance of her hair was wafted ahead of her. In spite of his awareness of her, Johnny continued to lean against the gnarled oak tree, his eyes on the purple horizon, and did not look around until she spoke.

"I thought I ought to tell you what your pay will be," she said.

It was a faltering start. The way he had been hired was disturbing her conscience now, and she was ready to arrive at a

friendly understanding. A cowboy's pay was the same from the Canadian border to the Rio Grande. Forty and found, a drink on Saturday, and too much time for thinking about things you don't want to think about. Johnny let smoke trickle through his nostrils, dropped the cigarette to the ground and ground it under his heel. He looked hard into her eyes, and for a moment it seemed that he had known her forever, and he was drunk with the sight and scent of her.

She was standing a foot away from him, and this time when Johnny reached for her there was no anger in his touch. He put his arm around her slender waist and pulled her gently toward him; but Lucy's muscles grew taut, and she stepped quickly out of his grasp.

"I'm no percentage girl," she said angrily, "and I didn't think you were this stuck on yourself. Don't you ever try that again!"

Johnny shrugged, but his eyes held hers. He wasn't drunk now. He was angry—angry at himself for forgetting the proprieties, angry at her for bringing him here. He laughed softly to keep her from knowing how he felt.

"Am I out of a job?" he asked quietly.

"No. When I want to fire you, I'll fire you."

"Then maybe you ought to tell me why I'm here," Johnny said. "Looks like I'm a one-man crew, and I ain't likely to be staging any roundups."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the girl's lips tighten, and he knew she was thinking that it ought to be done, nevertheless.

The strongest woman sometimes looks pitifully weak in the face of a man's challenge.

"Tomorrow you'll spade out a water hole down near Elk Canyon. There's a spring that runs part of the year down there, and some of the cattle can't get to the creek any more. I'll keep you busy, and I'll tell you every day what's to be done."

The last words floated back over her shoulder, for she was already on her way to the house.

AFTER THE first week, Johnny Sain was beginning to think the boys at the Chinook Saloon had been hoo-rawing him, but he was sick and tired of the Belt Buckle. He had mucked out half a dozen small water holes, repaired a line shack which he figured no one would ever use again, and had choused out twenty strays from one of the roughest cedar brakes he had ever ridden. He had blisters up to his elbows, a bruised thumb he'd whanged with a hammer while trying to hang a door on the cabin, and a dozen scratches over his cheeks which had come from riding the brush. But during all the meals—where conversation since the first night had concerned chiefly the work he was to do or had done—there had been no mention of nesters or impending trouble.

But trouble was there, and Johnny found it. He stepped out of the bunkhouse one morning shortly before sunrise and found Lucy Dunlop waiting for him. She wore a pair of rough levis, high-heeled boots and a flannel shirt which threatened to throw its buttons every time she took a deep breath. With her were two cow ponies, a lass rope coiled on the horn of each saddle.

Recovering from his first shock at seeing her, Johnny went on to the washstand and doused his face with cold water. He remembered now that she had been more talkative at supper the night before than she had since he had been here, although her instructions to stay at the ranch and repair harness had been given in a hesitant manner. This, Johnny had thought at the time, was an indication she was searching her mind for a chore he would find particularly distasteful.

"I changed my mind about today," she said cheerfully, coming up behind him as he rubbed his face with a coarse towel. "I think we'd better brand those strays you rounded up. I'll help. Do you want breakfast?"

"Sure," Johnny said. "I ain't responsible for a thing until I've eaten of a morning."

He did not expect her to laugh at this, and the pleasant humor of her face when she chuckled made him grin in spite of

himself. He was conscious of learning the first of her personal habits when she told him she never ate until noon, and then he went on to the house where Handy greeted him with a grunt and a scowl and a heaping platter of bacon and eggs.

"I never saw an Injun who knew as little about things as they pretend," Johnny said to Handy, "so I'd like you to set me straight on something. How come none of the men in these parts has offered to lend Miss Dunlop a hand here? Why does she have to go out and practically shanghai an innocent puncher like me?"

Behind him, the old Crow woman's shuffling movements were stilled, but the silence hung on for so long that Johnny finally turned to make sure she had not gone away.

Handy looked him straight in the eyes. "When two braves fight for one wolf pelt whole nation does not fight. Two braves fight, others watch. If braves have squaws, maybe squaws fight, too. Miss Lucy need squaw man."

Johnny turned back to the table and finished the meal in silence. Instead of reluctance, the Crow woman had shown eagerness in answering him.

Mellowed by Handy's devoted attention and warmed by the amount of rich black coffee he had drunk, Johnny returned to the bunkhouse with a resolution to be more amiable in his future relations with his employer. He did not get a chance to show his good intentions.

As soon as he came in sight, Lucy stepped into saddle and sent the big roan galloping away. Johnny mounted and followed at a casual lope behind her, wondering at her eagerness and admiring the lithe, easy manner of her riding. It was the first time she had permitted herself to be alone with him since he had tried to kiss her, but he knew it was not because she was afraid of him. She considered it a punishment for his impetuosity.

WHEN THEY reached the grazing grounds, Lucy ground-tied her roan alongside his pinto and helped him gather wood for a fire. When the em-

bers were glowing, she took the Belt Buckle iron from her saddlebags and tossed it into the fire. While it was heating, she mounted and rode swiftly toward the small bunch of cattle fifty yards away.

Johnny looked toward the fire, and then whirled toward the girl again as a hair-raising cowboy yell pierced the quiet air. Lucy rode into the midst of the white-faced cattle yip-yipping like a Comanche, and Johnny stared uneasily as a hard-running calf broke away from the herd and came charging straight at him. Close behind the charging animal was Lucy Dunlop, a lass rope hissing in a wide arc above her head. The calf was less than twenty feet away when the rope shot out, encircled the animal's forelegs, and sent it tumbling end over end on the ground. Lucy came out of the saddle in a flying leap, the rope tied hard and fast to the saddle horn. A few quick movements and the calf was helpless, all four legs neatly hogtied.

"Brand him," Lucy said, arising and throwing her hair back out of her eyes.

Johnny Sain did as he was told. Lucy stood close behind him, watching the operation carefully, and Johnny was pleased with her nearness. She flipped the rope free, sending the animal hump-backing and bawling into the brush, and headed for her waiting horse. Johnny called to her, saying he thought he ought to do the roping, but Lucy kept going.

"Never mind," she called. "I've changed my mind."

"That's getting to be a habit now," Johnny said. He was hoping to draw her into conversation by showing animosity, but Lucy ignored the remark.

"I just wanted to show you I can brand a calf," she laughed. "What I really want you to see is a little picture over on Crazy Creek."

Johnny did not reply, but anticipation was a spur on his spine as they rode away, with Lucy choosing the trails. He resented her sudden indication of friendship. It weakened the resolve in his own mind and made him uneasy. He had no intention of staying here until people forgot Johnny Sain could lift a horse. Just being near

Lucy Dunlop these days worried him even more. A girl with her beauty could snare a man with it, as easily as she had snared him with a challenge the day she saw him in Claybank. He had been waiting for the one command from her that would let him accuse her of this deliberate trickery.

Sometimes the thing a man expects can surprise him most when it happens. It was that way with Johnny. He had been lost in his own thoughts for a long time when Lucy finally spoke to him and he became conscious of his surroundings. They were on a wooded knoll, and below them was a pleasant little creek which wound through a narrow arroyo and out into the plains beyond. Farther away, Johnny could see the half-finished outline of a log and sod hovel.

A black-bearded man and a slender, blond helper were still working on the building. Between the knoll and the creek gleamed the slick yellow hue of skinned cottonwood poles. Johnny could not see the barb-wire strands from here, but he knew they were there; and he knew that because of them he had been mucking out water holes for Belt Buckle cattle.

"I think I'd better tell you something about the Belt Buckle now, Johnny," said Lucy.

"I think I've heard it. Just tell me what you want me to do."

The girl misinterpreted Johnny's anger for anxiety. She turned toward him with a relieved smile. "Thank you for that, Johnny." She reined her horse close to his, leaned over and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "That's for pulling a knife on you."

Johnny did not turn his head toward her. He said, "What do you want me to do, Lucy?"

"There's only one thing you can do, Johnny. Ride down with a gun in your hand and tell 'em to get off. You look like you can back it up and they'll believe you'll do it. They never would believe I could. I put a pair of wire snippers in your saddlebag before you got up this morning.

"You heard the story in town, I suppose, so you know you're in the right. It really isn't between the Belt Buckle and the

nesters. If it had been that kind of fight, my own men would never have quit. They would have enjoyed throwing lead at nesters, but they didn't want to mix with another cattleman and this is between the Belt Buckle and Sam Cooper. He's got the Circle C south of us. A week after father died he offered me a price—a half price. I laughed at him. But he's wanted the Belt Buckle for years, even before father died, and he put the squatters there to starve me off. When that happens he'll buy for less than half price or move in for nothing. The squatters will draw their pay and move on. This is not a fight; it's a freeze-out."

IT WAS more of a story than Johnny had heard before, so he let her go on with it. But when Lucy Dunlop had stopped talking, Johnny started. He told her he was an ordinary, peace-loving citizen, and that if four other men didn't want to fight her wars why should he. He told her she had shamed him in front of other men, knowing he could not refuse to take the job under such circumstances, but she couldn't trick him into getting himself killed. In conclusion he told her it wasn't very lady-like to go around threatening people with Bowie knives one day and kissing them the next just to get her own way.

"I've been waiting for this," Johnny said hotly, "because I knew it was coming. I've quit, lady."

Johnny never expected her to cry. When he looked at her and saw the moisture in her eyes a lump came up in his throat, and he almost jumped off his horse to apologize. At that moment, with the right words, she could have sent him charging off the hill with a gun in each hand and a knife in his mouth and she wouldn't have needed to promise a thing.

Such was the feeling of Johnny Sain when he found a woman whom he could make cry. It had never happened before. But Lucy Dunlop still had some things to say. She said them with tears rolling down her cheeks, but they were as biting and bitter as they would have been if she had been clutching the Bowie knife in her hand.

"All right, Johnny Sain," she cried. "You just saved yourself from getting fired. Any man who doesn't take orders on the Belt Buckle draws his pay. So go away. Go back to lifting a horse! Huh! You think that makes you a man; you think it proves you're strong. Well, you're weak. Lifting a horse only proves one thing, Johnny Sain. It proves you're a fool! Don't bother to come back to the ranch. I'll send your bedroll to the Wells Fargo office in Claybank, and I'll send your pay with it. But the



next time you're feeling big because you can lift something big, consider the horse!"

She flipped the reins angrily and a flurry of hoofs carried her swiftly away from the knoll. Johnny turned just in time to see her disappear over the near horizon. Then he looked back at the squatters across the creek. He couldn't quite decide if he had won anything.

STARLIGHT in the dome of the sky above you, the whisper of sage about you and the comforting stamp of a faithful horse grazing near by—that's all a man needed for a restful mind and strength to face the next day. Johnny Sain decided this while lying flat on his back, his head propped on his saddle and the campfire throwing flickering shadows against the horizon. He was twenty miles out from Claybank when he camped and cooked his supper, and he kept telling himself his mind was more at rest than it had been in many days. He had stopped in town only long enough to leave a forwarding address at the Wells Fargo office. He'd have his clothing sent on to Red Oak, and he'd pick his bedroll up there without the risk of ever meeting another woman such as Lucy Dunlop.

Johnny's sleep that night had about as much calm as a stampede. He kept dream-

ing he was in court, and every time he looked up at the judge's bench, there sat Lucy Dunlop. Strangely, Johnny was pleading in defense of his most cherished skill.

He told Lucy she would have to know all about him before she would be capable of judging him. He told her about the scrubby little ranch he grew up on just outside of Crowfoot Flats and how it grew more sand and rock than it did grass. They had a long drought, and most of the cattle died and others were sold for a little of nothing.

Johnny blamed the drought most of all, but guessed just plain hard luck had a hand in it, too. About the time they were flat broke, Johnny's mother became seriously ill, and she needed to get back East to a hospital.

"My old man tried to borrow the money to send her," Johnny said in his dream, "but the bankers in Crowfoot Flats laughed at him. We did the only thing we knew to do. We decided to steal it. We waylaid the stage, but we were greenhorns and we made a mess of it."

Tossing and tumbling in his blankets, Johnny went on with his story. The shotgun guard had killed his father and winged Johnny in the arm. He rode away with blood running down his saddle and went straight home. When he arrived he learned it would have done no good if the hold-up had been a success; his mother was dead. Further effort appeared so futile he simply sat down beside his mother's bed and waited for the sheriff to come and get him.

Johnny's sentence was ten years, but he got out in five for being a good prisoner. The warden told him what he'd have to face unless he played a smart hand.

"First thing you've got to do is make people think of you as Johnny Sain, the man, instead of Johnny Sain, the convict," the warden had said. "So go back fighting or you've got a rough trail to ride for the rest of your life."

On his way back to Crowfoot Flats, Johnny Sain saw a circus in Butte. One of the acts had a strong man lifting two giant dumbbells. Johnny thought it was a fake,

so he stayed after the show to find out. He went to the strong man's tent and asked to have a try at lifting the weights. He couldn't budge them. The strong man told him muscles alone could do nothing. It took balance, coordination and training.

Johnny got a job as the strong man's helper and stayed with the show three months. He learned the tricks, and he learned how to push himself into the public eye. When he left the circus, Johnny bought the lightest horse he could find, the wiry little pinto. He gentled the horse and taught it to stand until he could get balanced beneath it in such a way that he wouldn't have to lift the entire weight with any one set of muscles. That was the whole secret of the strong-man act. The horse went over bigger in the towns Johnny visited than the weights ever did. Nobody thought of Johnny Sain as a convict when he went home and lifted his horse.

THERE in his restless sleep Johnny told more than he would ever tell anyone. And he confessed that the Belt Buckle brought back too many memories to him. He never wanted to starve and suffer again. But when he had finished, Lucy Dunlop's green eyes beamed down from the judge's bench, and she said: "Consider the horse."

At that Johnny Sain woke up fighting mad. He sat up quickly, rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly and then sank back against the saddle, thinking of Lucy Dunlop. He hadn't made any more sense out of her words in his dream than he had when she first said them.

Johnny Sain was down on his hands and knees in the dirt outside a Butte saloon when the meaning of Lucy Dunlop's words at last seeped through the resentment that fogged his mind. He had just hefted the patient pinto up on his back, and the roar of an approving crowd was ringing in his ears. A few feet away stood Jake Boyd, the blacksmith whom Johnny had learned to know and trust on his many trips here. Jake had placed Johnny's bets and was holding a Stetson full of money.

Abruptly Johnny let the pinto down to

earth and getting heavily to his feet, rubbed the sweat and dirt off his forehead. This time he wasn't grinning. He climbed wearily aboard the pinto and said: "Hold on to that for me, Jake. I'll be back for it one of these days."

Jake Boyd's toothless mouth fell open, and he yelled, "Hey, Johnny, where in hell are you—"

But Johnny Sain was already spurring the pinto down the street, dodging around buckboards and staring pedestrians. It took him a day and a half to reach Claybank, and what sleep he had on the way was not worth mentioning.

The sun was directly overhead and the hot air was filled with the buzz of insects when Johnny came into the brush where he had left Lucy Dunlop a few days before. He sat on the slope and rested a while, his eyes squinted with thought while he stared at the squatter's hovel below him. Sweat poured out from under his hatband and left wet streaks in the dust on his brown cheeks.

He rode leisurely off the knoll and forded the creek without looking back at the drooping strands of barb-wire which he had cut with the wire snippers Lucy Dunlop had left in his saddlebag. At first the place looked deserted, but the black-bearded nester heard the slosh of the horse's feet and stepped out of the hovel to watch him approach. The man Lucy had called Fain Kerber was younger than Johnny had judged from a distance, and the kinky black beard covered a hard jaw and square chin.

"Howdy," Johnny said. He brought his horse up five feet from the big nester and stepped easily to the ground. "Call out your partner."

The man's dark eyes narrowed suspiciously. "He's in town picking up some grub. I talk for both of us."

A tight grin cracked some of the dust around Johnny's lips. "Good. You listen for both of you. I just want to tell you I don't like paid poachers. You're on Belt Buckle land, mister, and Sam Cooper won't pay you to stay here any more after today. I thought I'd give you a chance to pull out on

your own before I go down there and tell him to move you. It ain't my way to go behind a man's back."

The flat statement came as a shock to the bearded man, and he thought it over for a moment. When the meaning was clear to him, he wasted no words. Rolling muscles knotted his shoulders beneath the tight blue shirt he wore and his bearded chin sank down on his chest. He looked up from under dark brows at Johnny Sain and his deep voice was too controlled. "Maybe you never will see Sam Cooper, cowboy."

That's all he said before he shuffled in swiftly toward Johnny Sain. Johnny braced and waited, a cocky grin on his face. He had come here for a fight and he was getting one. The parting jabs of Lucy Dunlop were in his mind, and he wanted to hit someone just to prove a point.

HE WATCHED the man's angry eyes for a signal, and when they flickered brightly he threw up a guarding right hand. But he was too slow. The blow hit him on the chin like a thunderbolt, and he saw a flash of lightning. He tried to break his fall, and the nester's other fist jarred him before he felt the hard earth under him.

Shaking his head, Johnny pushed himself up from the ground. He didn't wait for anything now. He tasted blood in his mouth, and unbidden tears blurred his right eye where the nester's fist had landed a second blow. Johnny aimed a fist at the man's scarred nose and grunted in satisfaction when he saw blood spurt from it.

But that was all Johnny saw for the next few minutes. His mouth flew open in surprise as the nester suddenly ran straight into him. Sickening pain shot through him as the man's knee jerked upward and into his groin. Powerful arms grabbed him around the waist, pinning him helplessly, and he thought his ringing head was going to burst when Fain Kerber's brawny shoulder rose sharply and cracked him under the chin.

As abruptly as he had grabbed him, the nester released his grip on Johnny Sain and took a step backward. Johnny stood

there tottering, his eyes glassy and his stomach rolling. He tried to duck forward, but Kerber never gave him that chance. The nester rocked back on his heels and hit Johnny with all his might squarely in the face. The blow was like a numbing weight, and Johnny's only sensation was one of falling backward. He did not lose consciousness, but he was powerless to offer resistance when Kerber picked him up bodily and carried him toward the creek. Johnny felt the cold splash of water in his face, and he wanted to lie there and let it soothe his aching body, but he knew he had to get up or drown.

He slipped backward twice before he was finally able to stand, but at last he made it, and humiliation began to eat away the pain which had sickened him before. Without glancing at the bearded nester again, Johnny walked slowly toward his horse, mounted and went back the way he had come. The only point he had proved was what Lucy Dunlop had told him: A man is not big because he can lift something big. But he also thought of what the circus strong man had told him: Muscles alone could accomplish nothing.

This gave him a measure of comfort, even though he knew he would have to fight Sam Cooper with weapons of the rancher's own choosing. It was the simpler way, if less certain, and he should have tried it first. As he rode toward town, a plan more daring than Cooper's formed in his mind.

When he reached Claybank, Johnny rode straight for the Chinook Saloon. He pushed quickly through the swinging doors, and as soon as he appeared the tinkle of the piano stopped and someone yelled at him. It was one of the men who had seen him lift the horse, and they tried to turn his appearance into another celebration. The hollows in Johnny's thin face seemed to deepen a little, and his smile was more of a tight challenge than the cocky grin by which they remembered him.

Johnny Sain held up a restraining hand, and questioned loudly: "Anybody in here need a job? I'm running the Belt Buckle and I'm looking for a crew."

The yells and good-natured joshing

stopped. Johnny returned the solemn looks of the men with a cynical smile. It was easy to see why Lucy Dunlop had tricked him. When nesters and cattlemen started throwing lead at each other there were plenty of willing hands. But to these men a job at the Belt Buckle looked like an agreement to wage a war with their own kind, and they wanted no part of it. This spidery line which a man could draw in his principles roused Johnny's anger, but he held it in check.

"Well, now," Johnny said, "it looks like work is right plentiful hereabouts. And you don't have to worry about the squatters out on Crazy Creek, either. They're pulling out tomorrow."

JOHNNY had saved his hole card, and he had played it well. All he had to do now was make it stick. It worked well enough at the Chinook. Fifteen minutes later, he came outside with five men behind him. He had chosen them from eight applicants, and they were clean-cut, hard-muscled men who could look you in the eye. They all wore guns.

Before mounting the pinto, Johnny opened one of his saddlebags and lifted out a cedar-butted .44 and strapped it around his waist. He always carried it with him, but this was the first time he had worn it since he had surrendered to the sheriff when he was a frightened, heart-sick youngster of eighteen. Strangely, he felt much the same right now.

As soon as they were out of town, Johnny swung off the trail and headed across country. He rode hard, enjoying the slap of chokecherry and sagebrush against his stiff levis. He looked over his shoulder at the procession behind him, and a long grin slit his face. They were wondering why he was riding toward Sam Cooper's Circle C instead of the Belt Buckle, but they asked no questions. He had made them a promise, and they expected him to keep it.

Johnny stepped down from his saddle at the Circle C gate and spoke to his men. Nodding silently, they sat their saddles and Johnny walked up on the porch of the big clap-boarded house alone.

Sam Cooper answered his knock, and stood staring at him in open curiosity. The rancher was short and thick-bodied. He had a broad, square-chinned face and big hands with black hair standing out on them like bristles on a wild boar's back. He would be a hard man in a fight, Johnny thought and was reminded of his visit to the squatter's camp a few hours earlier. Cooper's pale grey eyes lifted over Johnny's shoulder to the men at the gate, and a knot of muscle popped up along his craggy jaw.

"If you're Sam Cooper I'd like to talk with you a minute," Johnny said evenly. He introduced himself and held out a hand which Cooper clasped automatically.

Cooper invited him inside, and Johnny entered a big square room where the floor was covered with animal skins and the walls mounted with Indian relics. Cooper motioned him to a seat in a wicker settee, sat down opposite him and said: "I believe you're a stranger in these parts."

Johnny grinned and shook his head. "Not any longer, Cooper. I just bought the Belt Buckle ranch."

As his affable lie sank home, Johnny had to repress a chuckle. Cooper's big chest gave a noticeable heave as he sucked in air, and a flush spread over his weathered face. Cooper had just lost a prize, he thought, and it was filling him with defeat. Annexation of the Belt Buckle to his already prosperous Circle C would have made him one of the biggest cattlemen in Montana.

"I'm right glad to see it back in a man's hands," Cooper grunted.

"I aim to run that," Johnny said, "so I'll come to the point. I don't like people crowding in on my graze, especially paid squatters." Johnny turned a significant glance out the window at the five armed men. "I'd rather get rid of them without bloodshed," he continued, "so if they've got any friends around here somebody ought to tell them that. Unless they're gone by noon tomorrow, me'n my men are going down there and bury them."

"That's pretty strong talk," Cooper said. He had a six-gun belted high on his left side, and he kept moving his hand as if he wanted to grip it.

Johnny stood up and held out his hand again, and told Cooper he had enjoyed talking with him. He started toward the door with his hat in his hand, but when he was halfway there he turned and looked at Cooper again.

"You wouldn't want to get in a few shots at the squatters, too, would you, Cooper?"

The rancher shook his head. "No, I'm a good deal like you, Sain. Don't want any trouble. Matter of fact, I might send one of my boys over to tell them the Belt Buckle has a new owner. I don't believe they're the kind to want trouble."

Outside, Johnny Sain, with his back to Sam Cooper, winked broadly at his men and climbed into the pinto's saddle. They rode away from the Circle C in a cloud of dust, but they still did not go to the Belt Buckle. Johnny Sain led them to the ridge overlooking the nester camp.

They stayed well back in the timber, and Johnny kept a close watch on the creek. He did not have long to wait. At dusk Sam Cooper rode into the squatter camp aboard a big dun horse. The rancher talked a while with the black-bearded man and rode away. An hour later, Johnny saw Fain Kerber carrying parcels and crates out of the half-finished hovel. Kerber hitched two high-hipped horses to a loaded buckboard shortly after dark and drove away from the creek. Johnny knew he would stop along the way and tell two other men that they, too, were out of a job.

WHILE they had been on the ridge, Johnny's new crew had huddled together and he had heard their low mumbles of conversation. They had put up with all the mystery they were going to put up with, and he knew he had to tell them what this was all about.

They took it with good nature when they found out it was all a bluff. The way Johnny explained it to them, it was a double bluff. Cooper had been running one a long time, trying to force Lucy Dunlop to sell the Belt Buckle by making it a dangerous place to work. He thought he had failed when he heard Johnny Sain tell him the ranch had already been sold. Cooper

didn't think it would be worth a fight to get it, and Johnny's gun-hung crew at the gate had been a convincing argument.

"But it was no pretense when I gave you a job," Johnny told the men. "It's roundup time and the Belt Buckle cattle need to be shipped. There's a hard day coming up, so let's head for home."

There were stars in the sky and the moon was up and the sweet breath of the night range was blowing in Johnny's face when the Belt Buckle ranch came in sight. Behind him were five men who had cast their lot with his, but Johnny's heart was so light it was riding alone. He thought it strange, yet very simple, that a man was seldom what he thought himself to be and that it took someone else to see him as he really was.

Lucy Dunlop had made no more sense than a locoed Indian when she first told him to consider his horse; but when Johnny started looking at old Jake Boyd up there in Butte he remembered what she had said. Jake had never done more than shoe horses for other people, but those people swore by him and trusted him, and he had more friends than any man in town. That was what came of a way of life, of being a

part of something that kept life going.

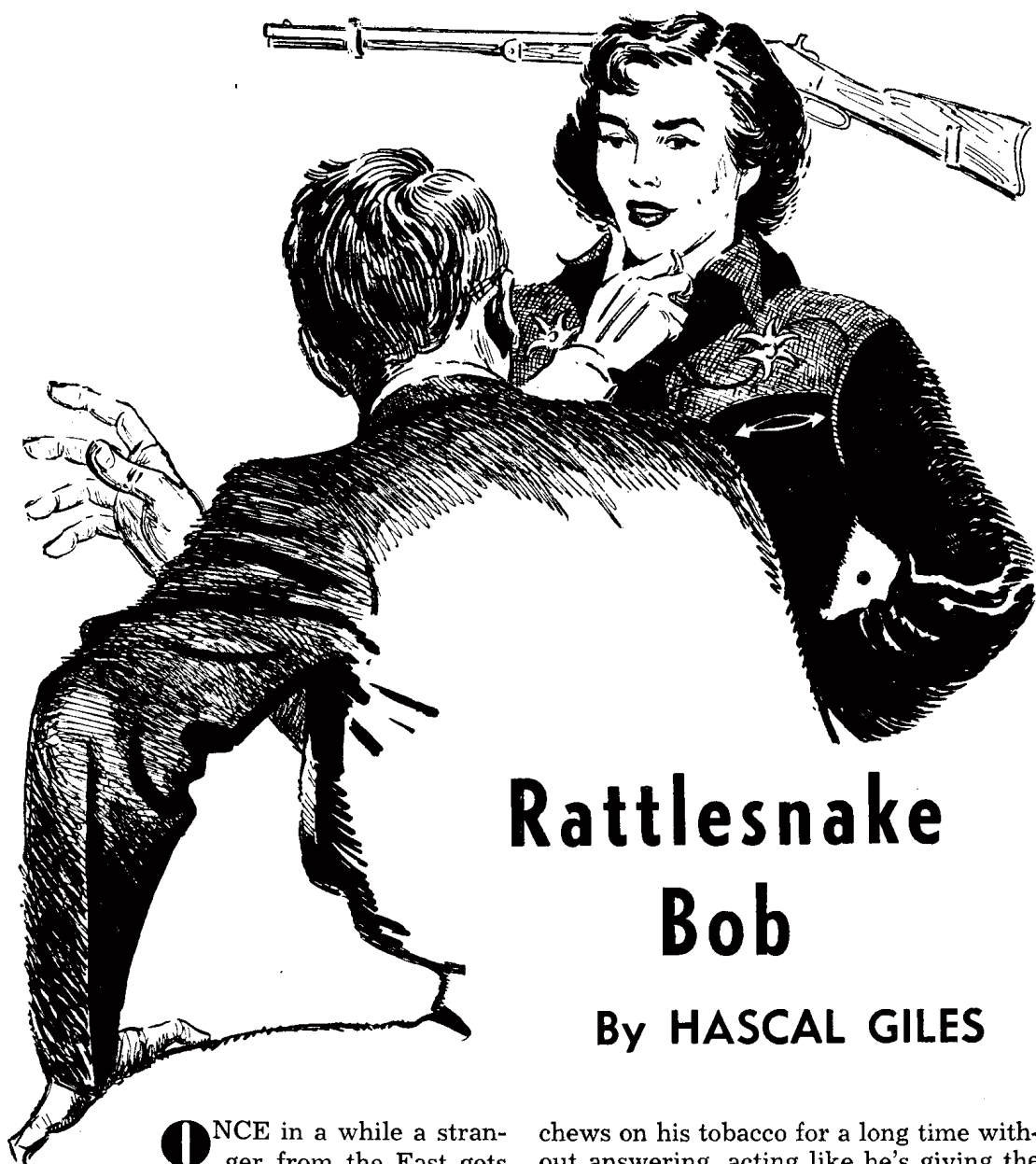
A man could get too old to lift a horse and live his latter years unknown and useless to anyone. It was hard to see this unless a man found the proper viewpoint, and it wasn't easy to swap places with a horse just to size yourself up. But Johnny had finally done this, and he figured he must have looked pretty stupid to the pinto who got as much attention as he did simply by standing still and letting a damn fool cowboy lift him off his feet.

It was long after the Belt Buckle's new crew was settled for the night when Johnny Sain finished saying all this to Lucy Dunlop. She had been silent through the long recital, and she said nothing now to help him.

Johnny went on soberly: "So I kept thinking about what you'd said, and I came back and did what I did because I want to spend the rest of my life here with you and—and—Lucy, I hoped you'd feel the same way. Do you?"

She murmured something that Johnny couldn't hear, but the way she moved into his waiting arms and lifted her lips to his was all the answer Johnny needed—or wanted.





Rattlesnake Bob

By HASCAL GILES

ONCE in a while a stranger from the East gets off the stage in Blackjack, and, if he's looking for information, he usually makes his way to the adobe jail and inquires of Sheriff Nate Gibson. Sometimes they ask for Robert Hardy Stitt, and it's then that Nate gets a puzzled look on his leather-brown face and

chews on his tobacco for a long time without answering, acting like he's giving the matter his most serious consideration.

Finally, he puckers his lips, aims at the cuspidor across the corner of his cluttered desk and, after everyone has scurried to safety, Nate says: "I reckon you must mean Rattlesnake Bob Stitt, pilgrim. Know 'im well. Matter of fact, I reckon I

Robert Hardy Stitt couldn't see why a man should be known by any other name in Blackjack, Texas. He had to find out the hard way

was the first person to lay eyes on 'im when he come here to take over the Triangle Ranch."

And then, just to let the stranger know he's in Texas, Nate tells how it was that Robert Hardy Stitt almost got chased out of Blackjack before he learned the cow country was full of titled lords.

* * *

Everyone in Blackjack knew the Triangle Ranch belonged to a rich old Englishman back east by the name of Sir John Cokesbury, but they didn't mind this much because they didn't have to be bothered with him. Ace Spates, the Triangle ramrod, ran the place and Sir John divided his time between a sugar maple tract in Vermont and a cotton plantation in South Carolina. The only contact he had with the Triangle after he came to Blackjack and bought it up for back taxes was a yearly report mailed by Ace Spates along with a draft on the Blackjack bank for any profits that the spread might show.

The first anybody knew of any change in this arrangement was when Ace Spates received a letter saying Sir John had cashed in his chips. There was a copy of his will enclosed, and from this Ace learned how Sir John had disposed of his holdings in the States. He had left the South Carolina property to his manager there, the sugar plantation went to a cousin in England, and the Triangle to Robert Hardy Stitt, "who has been overseer of my Vermont holdings for the past six years and the only man among my associates who has the good business sense and intestinal fortitude to make a success of an undertaking in such a God-forsaken place as Blackjack, Texas."

After he got off the stage in Blackjack one day a month later and explained to the sheriff he was the new owner of the Triangle, and not a medicine show barker, Robert Hardy Stitt rented a carriage and drove out to the ranch with as much confidence as if he had been born in Texas.

IT WAS true that Nate Gibson's reaction to his arrival was somewhat disturbing, but Stitt charged that off to plain native jealousy. Nate looked him over from the toes of his gleaming black dragon boots to the top of his duster-covered plaid cap, and said: "I hear tell Sidney Dalton tried to buy Triangle off Sir John before he passed on, and I allow the offer still stands. Was I you, pard, I'd sell. Any Texas bull with half sense eats Englishmen alive. You don't know a cow from the east end of a barn, and you won't have a crew by sun-up. Now the best way to get to Sidney's Bar D is to go right past Triangle and keep to your—"

"Really, old chap, the Triangle is not for sale," Stitt told him, and went on to the livery stable to rent the rig.

The first person he saw when he came into the Triangle ranch yard was a big raw-boned man with steel gray hair and a broad, sun-lined face. The man was standing in front of a long clapboarded structure that Stitt judged to be the employes' quarters, and he was bent over a basin of water, scrubbing his face with his hands. At the sound of the rig stopping, the man sleeved the water off on his faded blue flannel shirt and looked around.

His eyes opened wide when he saw Robert Hardy Stitt sitting there in his fawn-colored riding breeches and short-tailed green jacket. "I reckon you've done lost your way, pilgrim. The road to town is back there a-ways."

"I'm looking for a Mr. Spates," Stitt said. "He's the overseer here, I believe."

The way the newcomer dumped his words out in a hurry and then bit them off at the end brought a pained look to the rawboned man's face. "I'm the ramrod here, I reckon. We ain't got no overseer. I'm Ace Spates."

"Then you must've received my wire, old fellow. I'm Stitt."

"Howdy," Ace Spates said. They shook hands briefly as Stitt stepped down into the yard, and then Ace Spates said, "I was shore sorry to hear of John Cokes-

bury cashin' his chips in."

"It was *Sir John*, y'know," Stitt corrected. "He was titled by the queen for doing a bully job of providing supplies for the—"

Ace Spates shrugged and cut him off short. "Never liked to hang too much of a handle on a man. I always called him plain John."

Robert Stitt seemed to bristle like an offended porcupine. To Stitt's way of thinking, informality was the worst enemy of respect. But, for the moment, he let Ace Spates' explanation pass without comment, and they got busy getting his belongings unloaded from the carriage and into the big log house which sprawled behind a grove of post oaks east of the bunkhouse.

One of the first things Stitt wanted to do was to look over the records of the Triangle's past operation. When he failed to find anything helpful in the dusty roll-top desk in the musty-smelling parlor, he asked Ace Spates to tell him about it.

The foreman took a sweat-soiled tally book from his shirt pocket and handed it to Stitt. "It's all in here. What's owin' to the boys, what's been spent for supplies and what we got to work on."

A look inside the book only confused Robert Stitt, who had found the paper work on the sugar plantation one of the most exhaustive and exacting of tasks. The book contained a list of words that hardly sounded like names, and a bunch of scrawled figures that were mysteries to all but Ace Spates.

"A cowpoke don't draw no wages until he's ready to pull stakes for good," Spates explained. "They draw tobacco and whiskey money, and the rest is left for a movin' stake."

It was a custom Robert Stitt could not approve from a business standpoint. "They will draw wages hereafter, Mr. Spates," he said. "They will be paid by check at the first of every month, and by *name*, Mr. Spates."

Ace Spates shrugged and looked sad. "I reckon you'll want to meet the rest of

the crew today, 'cause there won't be time tomorrow. I'll bring 'em in."

Ace went outside rubbing his brow like his head was full of buzzing hornflies. He returned a few minutes later with the four other Triangle riders who came in trying to walk without rattling their spurs too loud. They held their hats in their hands, bunching themselves around the wall like a group of kids on the first day of school. They were surprised to find Robert Hardy Stitt was not a crochety old gentleman with chin whiskers. Instead, he was rather boyish looking with mild blue eyes and a mouth that looked like it could smile easily when it wanted to. The surprise in their faces was brief, however, and when it was gone there were mostly expressions of uncertainty.

ROBERT HARDY STITT looked up at them from a chair behind the roll-top desk. He had a sheet of paper spread out beside Ace Spates' tally book, and he started setting things in their proper order right away.

"It is my opinion," Stitt said, "that men can work together efficiently only when they respect each other and their employer. In my country a man's name is his pride, and I expect it to be so on Triangle Ranch. You chaps may call me Robert, if you wish, and I shall address you by your names. Now, let's get right down to business."

Stitt paused and glanced at Ace Spates' tally book. He wrote something on the blank sheet of paper, and asked: "Who's Cobbler Jones?"

A bald, round-faced little man with a flour-sack apron tied around his waist stepped forward and smiled toothlessly. "That's me."

Stitt's notations on the paper became clear then, and every man in the room began to shift uncomfortably. He asked Cobbler Jones his real name, and after a long pause, Cobbler said: "Earl." The room shook with laughter. Stitt gave them a silencing stare, and the guffawing stopped.

"Hereafter, my good man, you will be known as Earl Jones on the Triangle.

And now, Mr. Spates, what is your name?"

Ace Spates looked helplessly about him, and his face turned the color of dead cactus. "Blythe," he said. The man immediately behind him was seized by a fit of coughing, but there was no laughter. Robert Stitt went right on down the list, correcting One-Shot Adams to Harold Adams; Bucky Lane to Alfonso Lane, and Muleshoe Davis to Herman Davis. Afterward, he dismissed them all except the foreman.

Robert Stitt couldn't have picked a worse time to show up at the Triangle if he had ridden in on an epidemic of hoof and mouth disease. He learned from Spates that the Triangle crew had spent the day getting equipment in shape for spring roundup. The gather was to start in the morning. He asked about delaying the range work until he was better acquainted with the duties of the ranch, but Spates shook his head.

"Prices are ridin' the top," the foreman said, "and they're bound to fall. Besides, it's best we get out and slap our brand on the young stuff before any maverickin' gets started. There's a nest of squatters moved in up the valley, and they're just waitin' to start a herd with a runnin' iron and somebody's unbranded calves. But it's your spread, mister. If you say wait, we'll wait."

"Not at all, old chap," Stitt said. "This ranch is the only thing I've owned of my own, and I expect to prove myself worthy of Sir John's trust. We'll start in the morning, of course." Ace Spates started to move away, but Robert Stitt stood up and clapped a comradely hand on his shoulder. "I'll need all your help and trust here, Blythe. This means a great deal to me, y'know. I was a very poor lad until Sir John brought me over from London to give me the same chance he found in this country."

Ace Spates winced at the sound of his Christian name, and hurried toward the door with his lips a thin line. He stepped back inside a moment later, and Robert Stitt thought there was an eager expres-

sion in his eyes when he said, "Sid Dalton's out here. Wants to palaver with you a minute."

"Then show the visitor inside," Stitt said coolly. He sat down at the desk again and waited, working himself into his most aloof attitude. This would have to be settled quickly and finally, and Stitt was just in the mood to talk man to man.

A moment later Sidney Dalton stepped inside, and Robert Stitt got up from the chair much faster than he had sat down. "Why—why you're a young lady!"

SIDNEY DALTON shoved her dusty Stetson off her jet black hair, and let it dangle on the back of her red silk blouse by the chin strings. She slapped her deerskin riding gloves carelessly against the thigh of her tight-fitting levis and smiled.

"Well, I should hope so," she said. "I'm glad to see you, Mr. Stitt. Mother and I run the Bar D north of here, and we've been hoping to pick up a little extra graze for a long time. We're prepared to offer you—"

Robert Stitt could not be as haughty as he had hoped to be, for he was still a trifle stunned by the appearance of this sun-washed girl with the flashing gray eyes who had a figure like a picture on a calendar, but dressed and talked like a range hand. But he did manage a certain stiffness in his voice when he interrupted to tell her that he had heard she would make this offer, that he was very happy to meet her, but that the Triangle was not for sale—now or ever.

Sidney Dalton did not seem to be overly disappointed. She chuckled pleasantly and started toward the door. "It's a standing offer, Mr. Stitt, so don't forget us when you change your mind. By the way, what's wrong with Ace Spates? He acts like he's just been gored by a Brahma."

"Why I don't know," Stitt said. "Really, I don't. I hadn't noticed Blythe was suffering from anything."

"Did you say Blythe?" The girl's voice rose in genuine laughter now, and she looked at Robert Hardy Stitt like she felt

sorry for him. "Oh, he's suffering all right, Mr. Stitt."

Sidney Dalton went on outside, still laughing. Robert Stitt watched her ride away, a bewildered expression on his face. She was a very strange girl, indeed, and quite arrogant, too. She had not said *if* you change your mind; she had said *when*. Was that a threat?

The Triangle roundup got off on schedule, but Robert Stitt felt from the very start there was something wrong with it. There was an uncomfortable air about the little caravan that moved away from the ranch and headed out into the trackless grass and blazing sun. Stitt chose a seat in the chuck wagon with Cobbler Jones, wearing, at the cook's insistence a pair of the man's patched levis and a cast-off black hat which looked like it had been run over in a stampede.

"Ought to tie on a pair of chaps, too," Cobbler suggested. "We got rattlers out here in some of these canyons long as a fence rail, and that's one thing they can't strike through."

Feeling uncomfortable already, Stitt passed up this suggestion and by the time they reached the first bunch of cattle he couldn't remember another word of conversation having passed between the men.

ACTIVITY was stepped up after the branding fire was made, and riders began driving in half-wild cattle from the brush and draws; but the zestful cursing and good-natured bickering which Stitt had always associated with these devil-may-care men of the outdoors was absent. He was an interested spectator to the proceedings, standing at a safe distance and watching as One-Shot Adams and Mule-shoe Davis hazed the white-faced cattle in close to the fire. There Bucky Lane went to work with rope and pigging strings, rendering them helpless under Ace Spates' branding iron in a matter of seconds.

Later in the afternoon, Stitt began to go along with the riders on trips into the hideaways to herd the cattle into the open. True to his British breeding, he was as

much at home on a horse as most of the men. But proof that he was not altogether a tenderfoot did nothing to relieve the tension dogging the roundup camp. The restraint held on like a danger signal, and it was not directed at him. The men seemed sullen and ill-at-ease among themselves.

The evening meal of jerky and beans was disposed of in the same silence as the work, and the men rolled up in their blankets and went to sleep without any lingering over cigarettes and horseplay at the campfire. Robert Stitt felt uneasy about the situation. He went to sleep with a foreboding that he would awake to some strange disaster.

But the work went on for the next three days much as it had at the beginning, and by nightfall of the fourth day the Triangle crew was camped at the foot of Eagle Canyon with three hundred head of prime cattle bunched between the sheer rock walls and ready to be herded to Black-jack's loading pens for shipment. They had worked around in a circle so that they were now less than three hours' ride from the home ranch, and Robert Stitt could hardly control his eagerness to be done with the work.

During the entire absence from the ranch he had heard no more than half a dozen scattered conversations among the men, and these were in gruff and cautious tones. There had not been so much as the calling of a name, for all conversations began with, "Hey, you there," or, "All right, hombre; lift a hand here."

Robert Stitt had held his curiosity and his disapproval in check as long as he could. With the roundup finished, it appeared to him that now was a time for relaxation and celebration. But the Triangle crew merely sprawled around the campfire that night, smoking wordlessly and staring morosely into the flames.

Stitt called Ace Spates aside and asked him what was wrong. Ace fixed him with a challenging stare. "Don't 'pear to be nothin' wrong, mister. We've made a good gather, and we've got less'n a day's drive to railhead." Ace glanced at the heavy

storm clouds scudding across the night sky and added: "With luck, that is."

Seeing that Spates would tell him nothing more, Stitt went back to the fire. The foreman got his bedroll from beneath the chuck wagon, tapped out the dead ashes from his pipe against the run-over heel of his boot, and went off into the darkness to find a place to spread his blankets. One-Shot Adams followed Spates, and Stitt knew he would be sitting there alone within a few minutes still not knowing what it was that threatened to tear apart his crew from the inside out.

BEFORE anyone else had a chance to turn in, the roar of Ace Spates' gruff voice from somewhere beyond the fire brought them all to their feet. The first thing they heard was a string of Ace's best-dressed swear words, and then a loud cackling laugh from gangling One-Shot Adams. But One-Shot's laugh seemed to peter out right when he was



enjoying it most, and the silence was followed by the unmistakable sound of two hard-muscled men swapping blows.

Even though he was the shortest man in the crowd by a foot, Bucky Lane cleared the campfire in a single leap and was gone. He took a short cut to the gnarled cedar where Ace Spates and One-Shot Adams had started to spread their bedrolls like two good partners.

Cobbler Jones' rheumatism had been bothering him from sleeping on the ground, and he was a little slow getting to his feet, but he didn't waste any time once he had his legs under him.

"Glory be!" Cobbler yelled. "It's a fight, by jingo!"

There actually wasn't much of a fight to it, Robert Stitt found when he came up behind Cobbler Jones a moment later, for there wasn't a man on the Blackjack range who was a match for Ace Spates in

a free-for-all. Ace's nose was spurting blood, but One-Shot's single lucky blow didn't disturb him any more than a mosquito bite. Ace had One-Shot down on his back, and was sitting astride him, lifting the man's head up and down by the hair and thumping it against the ground.

At Robert Stitt's command, Cobbler Jones and Bucky Lane caught Ace by the arms and pulled him off of One-Shot Adams. Muleshoe Davis, almost as big and hulking as Ace, took up his stance between them, but Ace kept glaring at One-Shot like he might tackle him again any minute.

"Now see here, you chaps," Stitt said sternly. "This sort of thing cannot go on at the Triangle, y'know. It's not at all the intelligent way to settle disputes. Really, old fellow, I'm surprised at you," he said to Ace Spates. "Why are you attacking this man?"

Ace Spates spat disdainfully and pointed a shaking hand at One-Shot Adams. "He called me something. That's why. And if he ever does it again I'll break every bone in his head."

"Whatever did he call you?" Stitt asked.

Ace Spates seemed to simmer down a bit, and he dug his toe into the dirt and looked away. "It's a personal matter, Mr. Stitt."

ROBERT STITT turned on One-Shot Adams for an answer then, and found that One-Shot still considered the roughing-up worth the satisfaction he got from stirring Ace Spates into a frenzy.

One-Shot's face was as innocent as that of a new-born colt. "Why, I only done what you said, Mr. Stitt. I just said 'Now, won't it be nice, Blythe, to walk into the Blackjack bar after we get the cattle loaded and cash a big fat check made out to Blythe Spates?' Then he tore into me. I don't rightly know what set him off that-away."

Ace Spates growled like a mad grizzly and took a threatening step toward One-Shot Adams. "You know, One-Shot. You ever call me that again and I'll make you

look like a discarded chaw of tobacco."

Robert Stitt stepped between the two men now, and his own face showed signs of rising anger. Stitt made a decision then, one he considered ungrateful and unfortunate; but it was for the good of the service, so to speak.

"Mr. Adams was following an order, Mr. Spates. I'm afraid if you can't do the same, I shall have to dismiss you."

"Suits me fine," said Ace Spates. He gathered up his bedroll and started toward the hobbled horses to pick out his mount. Over his shoulder, he said: "Leave my pay at the Blackjack Bar. In cash. I'll pick it up there."

One-Shot Adams shuffled from one foot to the other a time or two, and reached for his own bedroll. He mumbled that he had been working for Ace a long time, and that if the Triangle was too good for Ace it was too good for him as well. He said to leave his wages at the Blackjack Bar.

Bucky Lane and Cobbler Jones held a whispered conference with Muleshoe Davis, and then the three of them rolled their blankets and caught their horses. Robert Stitt knew there wasn't anything he could do to change their minds so he stood by helplessly and watched them leave. Just before they went out of earshot, he heard the men talking and laughing among themselves, and this brought a bewildered expression to his face. Robert Stitt didn't have to be a top hand to know he had big trouble in his lap.

BY THE dawn the next day, the clouds which had brought a worried look to Ace Spates' craggy face had stopped galloping around the sky and had piled up ugly and threatening over Eagle Canyon. Along the murky horizon, fingers of lightning were darting up in eerie flashes, and the cattle were milling restlessly.

Stitt mounted the buckskin pony which had been lent for him, and started riding an uneasy patrol along the makeshift pole fence which had been thrown up across the mouth of the canyon to keep the cattle penned. He could sense the nervousness of the herd, excited already because of

the strange surroundings, and he recognized it as a danger signal. He had heard what could happen at a time like this. At a sudden clap of thunder the cattle could come crashing easily through the flimsy barricade and be scattered over endless miles of range again.

Stitt was trying to sing to the cattle, like he'd heard Ace Spates do on other uneasy nights, when Sidney Dalton came riding into the camp on a prancing pinto.

The girl pulled her horse to a standstill alongside the buckskin, smiling. "Good morning, Mr. Stitt. I was wondering if you would consider an offer for the Triangle today."

Robert Stitt's jaw squared and his mild blue eyes narrowed in sudden conviction. "Really, my good girl, I believe I've been quite the fool. But you won't get the Triangle so easily, y'know. I judged you were determined in this matter, but I doubted you would go so far as to shanghai my men away from me. It's not very sporting of you, y'know. Rather disgusting, I'd say!"

He bowed stiffly in the saddle, turning his horse back toward the bawling cattle. Sidney Dalton reined the pinto swiftly around, blocking his way. Her red lips were trembling with indignation, and her walnut brown eyes were full of angry sparks.

"Why, you thick-headed tenderfoot!" she said between clenched teeth. "Does all that polite palaver mean you're accusing me of crowding you into a tight spot so I can force you to sell out? You've got some things to learn, Mr. Stitt."

She lashed the pinto into action so abruptly that Stitt dodged instinctively, thinking she meant to run him down. But the girl headed the horse in the other direction, riding furiously toward the Bar D. Stitt had no regrets for what he had said, but rather a vain longing for what might have been possible under different circumstances. If Sidney Dalton had not been so intent on taking the Triangle from him in her own way, Stitt might have found the opportunity at some later date to point out an obvious solution to her am-

bition to own the largest ranch in the Blackjack country. The merger of two properties—when one was owned by a woman and the other by a man—could be quite a simple matter sometimes. This had been on Stitt's mind since their first meeting when he found he could not keep from thinking about her. But now she probably would never speak to him again.

SIDNEY DALTON had said Stitt needed to learn some things, and his lessons started about two hours later when the girl came riding back to his camp with the whole Bar D crew behind her. She stopped her men with a wave of her hand, and then rode up beside Robert Stitt where he was still patrolling the canyon barricade.

"Something you ought to know about Texas, Mr. Stitt," she said tartly, "is that we consider it neighborly to help a man when he's in trouble."

Before Robert Stitt could reply, Sidney Dalton had turned and was shouting orders to the Bar D crew. "Get them out of that box canyon, boys, and point their heads toward Blackjack. The critters act like they'll run if the storm breaks, and if they do we'll chase them right into the loading pens. Get them moving, Bluff! Cougar, you and Cyclone take the drag, and don't let them circle on you."

"I was quite right, Miss Dalton," Robert Stitt said then. "I've been the fool, by jove. A terrible fool. Please forgive me."

"Forget it," Sidney said, smiling at his humility. "Even if I had been trying to freeze you out, I saw this morning that it wouldn't have worked. That's why we're here, I guess. But just promise me one thing. Don't go trying to change Bluff Crabb's name to Clarence or something. Bluff earned that name fair and square. He's proud of it, and wants to keep it, and I want to keep my foreman."

Robert Stitt raised up in the stirrups, watching his cattle string out toward the railroad. He glanced at the sky, saw that it was clearing, and he smiled happily. "Of course not, Miss Dalton. These are your men, and I expect you to. . . Did you

say he earned the name, Miss Dalton?"

The girl nodded. "One of the Curly Bill gang waylaid Bluff once when he was carrying the Bar D roundup cash back home. That was before my father died. Bluff sat there in the saddle twenty minutes, cussing and sweating and telling the bandit how he was Curly Bill's own brother; but he didn't give up the money. The dang fool road agent believed him!"

Sidney Dalton chuckled over one of the Bar D's favorite stories, but Robert Stitt did not feel like laughing. He looked at the girl, frowning. "And is it the same with One-Shot Adams and Ace Spates and the others?"

"One-Shot Adams came up on a prospector trapped in a slide up in Montana years ago. He rode up just as a big grizzly was about to charge the man. There was time enough for a man to draw and fire a single shot. One-Shot made it in time, right between the eyes. And Ace Spates—"

Robert Stitt let his breath out in a long sigh, turning his horse. "Why—why it's just like being knighted, y'know."

"What did you say?" Sidney Dalton leaned close to catch his words, but Stitt waved the remark aside as unimportant, and rode off to help Bluff Crabb chase the stragglers out of the canyon.

BY THE time Stitt caught up with him, Bluff Crabb was far back in the rocks and had dismounted to tighten his saddle cinch. Stitt swung down and walked toward him to express his appreciation for the Bar D foreman's help. He was within arm's reach of the stocky cowboy when the air was electrified by a whirring vibration they both recognized from instinct.

Bluff Crabb straightened with a jerk, and then froze in his tracks. The big diamond-back rattler was coiled on a rocky shelf four feet behind him, its flat head bobbing for a strike. Stitt took another step forward, and then he dived. His shoulders bowled Bluff Crabb over in an ungainly heap just as the snake lashed out and fell off the shelf beyond them.

The rattler writhed almost in front of them, trying to coil again. Stitt grabbed at its scaly tail in desperation. He got it in his hand, and flung the forward part of the squirming body away from him like a muleskinner cracking a whip. The result was much the same. There was a sharp cracking sound, and the snake did not seem hard to hold any more, but he did not know what had happened until Bluff Crabb spoke.

"I'm a sheepherder's uncle," Bluff Crabb croaked, getting his breath. "I've heard tell you could pop a snake's head off thataway, but you're the first hombre I've seen with a hankerin' to try it."

"I'm afraid it was an accident, old chap. Really, I was just trying to knock him against the stones."

Bluff Crabb thought that was the funniest thing he ever heard, and the boys around the Blackjack Bar thought it was funny, too, after the Bar D crew got the Triangle cattle into town and Bluff was telling about the snake-killing.

Robert Stitt didn't even know Ace Spates had heard about it, until the big gray-haired man came down to the loading pens that afternoon where Stitt was

still talking with Sidney Dalton. Ace had a stringy, red-haired puncher with him, but he made the man stand aside until he talked with Robert Stitt.

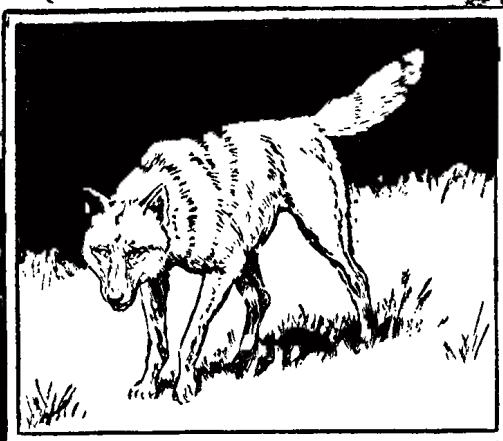
"Boss," Ace said brazenly, "I was wonderin' if you got any objections to my signin' on a new hand to help us out at the Triangle."

Robert Stitt's eyebrows went up in little rainbows for a moment, and then settled over the twinkle in his eyes. "Why, that's in your hands, Ace. Really, I think we might well need him."

Ace brought the redhead over and introduced him. "This is Loop Carter," Ace said. "Loop, meet the boss—Rattlesnake Bob Stitt."

From that day on, no one in Blackjack ever called Robert Hardy Stitt anything but Rattlesnake Bob. He felt it was something that Sir John, a man accustomed to titles, would have looked upon proudly. But there was one thing he never could get quite used to. Years later, when Sidney would step out to the veranda of the big Triangle-Bar D ranch house to meet new guests, he would wince a little every time she'd say: "Hello, there. I'm Mrs. Rattlesnake."





"Hold it right there!" Dave shouted. He whipped his rifle to his shoulder . . .

WOLF HUNT!

By
HASCAL
GILES

A white wolf is bad luck both for sheepers and cattlemen . . . And especially bad luck for any man—such as Dave Tanner—who is fool enough to hunt him!

BELOW him, Dave Tanner saw the moving glow of a cigarette, and he sidestepped his horse down the rocky bench toward the camp of the wolf hunters. When he was still a hundred feet away from them, he started whistling so they would know he was coming. There

was no campfire, but the men would be awake and alert; and they would be tired and trigger-quick. They had been out here five nights now, losing sleep and getting behind on their chores, and any movement might bring a shot crashing through the darkness. They would be that eager to kill the albino wolf and get back home.

Dave's tune could have had a dual purpose, if he had thought of it in that way. He had good news for the men, and it was worth whistling about. But he was making the sound for his own protection. They hadn't asked Dave to join this hunt, although the wolf had cost him two prime ewes in the past month. The big white animal was on the prowl again, and he knew no favorites. It would have troubled Dave's conscience none if he had let them go on hunting the albino for another five days. But he owed Farley Foster a favor, so he had come in search of them.

As soon as he was near enough to distinguish the shadowy shapes of men and hobbled horses, Dave sensed something was wrong, but it took him a while to find out what it was. There were eight men in the hunting party, all of them cattlemen, and a man who made his living from sheep couldn't be too brusque with them.

Most of them still didn't like the thought of sheep cropping on grass that might be feeding cattle, and it was because of this feeling that they hadn't invited Dave on the hunt. It would be all right with them if the albino killed more of Dave's ewes if it left their steers alone. But Farley Foster was a tolerant, understanding man. He had foresight enough to realize there was graze suitable for cattle and some suitable for sheep, and that the economy of the West needed the strength of varied production.

The men had been in a semi-circle when Dave first saw them, bunched close together like they were looking at something. They heard him coming, and by the time he drew rein a few feet away they had turned

around, but his view was still blocked beyond them.

Tom Simmons was the first to speak. He pushed his peaked black hat away from his ruddy brow, and looked at Dave like he had just swallowed something which disagreed with him.

"You lost something around here, feller," Simmons asked, "or was you afraid maybe we might get close enough to that white varmint to take a shot at him? The way you come across the prairie whistling he's probably halfway to Canada by now."

Dave started to laugh away the man's concern and tell him why he had come, but a sudden impulse of caution changed his mind.

"I was looking for Farley Foster," Dave said simply.

Tom Simmons gestured with his arm, so that some of the other men slid away from him, and then he, too, stepped aside.

"Have a look," Simmons said quietly.

A gasp of amazement pursed Dave's lips, and he rose in his stirrups for a better look. Lying on the ground behind the group of men was Farley Foster. He was hatless, his arms crossed woodenly over his belt. A faint breeze stirred the thin gray strands of his hair. He was dead. A damp smudge on his flannel shirt showed where the bullet had entered high in the center of Foster's chest.

"Who killed him?" Dave asked. He kept his voice low because he did not care to show these men his true feelings. Three hours ago Dave had talked with Foster's daughter, Velma. He had promised to bring her father back to the Circle Star before sunrise. He still would take him back, for he felt he could break the news to Velma Foster more gently than anyone else. When you loved someone you wanted to be with them at a time like this.

DAVE glanced over the faces in the crowd again. Farley Foster had enemies among them. Dave wondered if he

might have been indirectly responsible for the rancher's death. He had heard about the heated argument Tom Simmons had started with Foster in town a few months ago. Simmons had said some pretty harsh things after Foster sold Dave Tanner enough Circle Star graze to start a sheep spread.

"You've got the wrong idea, Tanner," Herb Bolling said. The B-in-a-Box man had read the thought in Dave's eyes and wanted to explain.

"It was an accident," Bolling went on. "We've been splitting up to hunt the albino wolf. We all rode out different ways about an hour after dark, and agreed to meet here at midnight. Bill Jackson found Foster's body in the rocks a mile north as he came back to camp. He had been shot somewhere else, and was trying to make it back here. Bill found his horse standing where Foster fell out of the saddle."

"That makes it an accident, huh?" Dave said tonelessly.

"One of us must have shot Foster, but we don't know who," Bolling said. "Every time a bush rattles we throw down at it. We've been pretty jumpy on the trigger, I guess, but we can't stay here all year."

Three of the men had fired their guns during the night: Herb Bolling, Tom Simmons and Lon Shadroe. They had checked on this among themselves, and, when Dave inquired about it, Herb Bolling had an answer ready for him. It was then that Dave stepped out of saddle, and suspicion was alive in his eyes. Two of the men who had fired a gun might have had a reason for killing Farley Foster.

"Seems some of you have been a mite careless," Dave said. "Or maybe one of you was real careful."

Dave Tanner knew he was stepping on sensitive toes, and placing himself in an unhealthy position. But it was worth the risk. He had found only one friend here, and now the man was dead.

"You trying to throw anything my way,

feller?" Lon Shadroe had kept silent, but now he took a quick step forward. His dark, slender face telegraphed the dislike and resentment he held for Dave Tanner. Shadroe was young and a bit wild. He drank too much and lost too heavily at poker, and when some of the other Circle Star punchers had begun to imitate his ways, Farley Foster had dismissed him. He was a bad influence.

Lon Shadroe had his fists doubled at his sides, and Dave feared he might have to fight him. But he didn't retreat from the threat.

"What did you shoot at?" Dave asked, meeting Shadroe's narrowed glance.

"A coyote," Shadroe said hotly. "And I got him, too. I saw an animal in the brush and put a slug in it. It's none of your business, Tanner, but if you don't believe it you can ride over to the coulee and take a look at the carcass. But I ain't shedding tears over Farley Foster. He thought he was better'n anybody else. I ain't been able to sign on anywhere since he fired me off the Circle Star."

"He didn't think he was better than me," Dave said evenly.

Tom Simmons was sullen and tight-lipped while he answered Dave's questions. He didn't know what he shot at. He heard a noise and fired. When he looked behind the rock where he thought something had been prowling, he didn't find anything. That was all Simmons had to say, and Dave didn't persist. The man had not moved his eyes off Dave's face since he had arrived. There was more danger of trouble from him than from Lon Shadroe. The young puncher was hot-tempered and mean, but he spoke his thoughts. Simmons was a brooding, calculating man, and, therefore more unpredictable.

The only man in the crowd who seemed to hold no ill will toward Dave was Herb Bolling, and the sheepman was grateful for his cooperation. The B-in-a-Box man shared Dave's grief over Foster's death

more deeply than the others, perhaps. Bolling had been hounded by bad luck most of his life, Dave had learned in the year he had been in this country, and Farley Foster had helped him often. Bolling once had run a general store in town, but bad debts and hard times had forced him out at a loss. Afterward, he had filed on a piece of graze south of the Circle Star which had been ignored by others because it held no water. But Farley Foster had allowed Bolling to water at the Circle Star. And two years ago, when a blizzard had wiped out many other small ranchers, Bolling had kept his stock alive on Circle Star hay.

"Your shot's still to come, Bolling," Dave reminded. "What was your target?"

"The albino wolf." A brief smile touched Bolling's soft mouth, and he appeared pleased he could give this answer. Or perhaps he was amused at the surprise which widened Dave Tanner's gray eyes.

"Are you dead sure of that, Bolling?"

"Dead sure. I've had a dozen looks at the critter in the seven-eight years he's been roaming this range, and you don't mistake a thing like that. All-white wolves don't come along every day, you know. Once in twenty years there's an albino in a litter, maybe, and I seen this one plain as I see you. But I shot too fast—missed clean."

Dave Tanner nodded. "I reckon you did, Bolling."

There was anger mixed with the surprise which came into Dave's eyes and stayed while Bolling talked. He became so engrossed in the man's explanation he forgot about the others until he heard the rasp of leather behind him. Dave whirled uneasily, and saw Lon Shadroe had caused the sound. The slender puncher was drawing Dave's rifle from the saddle boot, sniffing at the barrel. Dave relaxed. He had cleaned the gun hours ago.

"Just checking," Shadroe said when he saw Dave watching him. "We don't know

how long you've been up there on the bench, and it was a good place for a shot. You still owed Foster money for the land he sold you. That might be one way to cancel a debt."

TOM SIMMONS answered Shadroe before Dave had a chance. The gangling rancher grabbed the rifle from the cowboy's hand and shoved it back into the saddle boot.

"I'm getting sick of this jawing," Simmons said. "Farley got shot accidental, and he's dead and there's nothing none of us can do about it. Tanner wouldn't have the guts to kill a man. Now, I'm for getting back to what we come for. From the whole of us, that albino has run down two hundred head of stock in his time. I can't afford to lose no more to him."

Simmons fixed his eyes on Dave Tanner, and spat angrily into the grass. "I'm sick of you, too, mister. Now get out of here and leave us alone."

"I'll do that," said Dave. "But I reckon I'll have to take Foster's body to the sheriff and talk with him about it. It was no accident, Simmons. Foster was bushwhacked, and I know who did it."

Simmons tried a dry laugh, but it amounted to a sound of irritation. "How would you know anything about it?"

"Like Shadroe pointed out," Dave said. "There's no way of knowing how long I was up there on the bench. You can see a long ways from up there. Maybe I saw somebody kill him."

It had been an effort for Tom Simmons to control his patience, and now it reached an end. He strode around to face Dave Tanner squarely, standing with legs wide-spread and fists clenched at his sides.

"You can go tell the sheriff anything you want to, because he'll listen to us before he'll listen to one nosy sheepher. But there's one thing sure, Tanner. You ain't taking Farley Foster's body no place. He come out here with us, and we'll take him home

again. I don't aim to stand by and see a good cowman take his last ride with a sheep!"

Dave hesitated a moment, wondering if he should make an issue of the matter. He had avoided trouble with these men for a long time, partly because of Farley Foster's friendship and partly because of his own unassuming manner in their presence. Dave had planned it that way from the beginning. He had not wanted to antagonize them until he was out of debt, and his spread was supporting itself. By that time the cattlemen would be accustomed to his presence, and his success would speak for itself. Then he would feel free to speak of his love for Velma Foster, and when they were married the situation would be different. Cattlemen opposed nothing so strongly as newness and change, and they scorned all failures. Dave thought of this, and he knew if he retreated this moment in itself would be a failure.

"I'm taking Farley Foster's body in for a talk with the sheriff," Dave repeated.

He took a step forward, and Tom Simmons was there to block him. Simmons grunted a curse, and swung at him. Dave had been watching for the blow, and his left arm flicked up to stop it. Simmons' grimaced face was unprotected for the moment. Dave smashed his right fist into the man's mouth, feeling his knuckles grinding against teeth and the man's bristly black mustache.

Simmons rocked sideways, and then tottered over awkwardly to fall sprawling on one shoulder. He shook his head groggily, rising on hands and knees. He rose slowly, like he was going to stand, but that wasn't what he had in mind. Instead, he turned, still crouched, and dived at Dave's legs. The sheepman fought as he knew Simmons would fight if the chance came. Dave measured the man's dive, and then raised his right foot. The rancher's forehead rammed into the hard sole of the boot, sending a shock along Dave's leg. Dave

danced backward a step, shoving himself with the foot braced in Simmons' face. Momentum carried the rancher forward a few feet, but when he fell on the ground he didn't move.

"That's pretty rough fighting," Bill Jackson said from the quiet crowd who had watched the fight. "You had no call to tear his face up that way."

Dave had not expected his methods to bring approval from the crowd, but he felt pressed for time. He was sure of the identity of Farley Foster's killer, but the shred of evidence he had was too flimsy to convince a jury. He needed proof, and he needed it before the killer had time to figure out where he had made his mistake. The thing Dave didn't know was a reason for the killing. But he kept thinking of a wise saying he had heard somewhere about a man always knowing his enemies and never being sure of his friends. He hoped Velma Foster would be able to tell him more.

Dave measured Bill Jackson with a steady gaze, and said, "Maybe you'd like to do something about the way I fight."

Jackson shook his head slowly, and the moment of tension was gone. "We've got nothing against you, Tanner," Herb Bolling said. "I'll help you get Foster's body on your saddle."

LIGHTS still burned in the Circle Star bunkhouse when Dave reached the ranch. Some of the cowhands had been in a poker game, but Dave broke it up when he entered and told the foreman of Farley Foster's death. He relayed the explanation the wolf hunters had given him, saying nothing of the trap he had baited before he left the prairie camp.

The foreman went with him to the house, but it was Dave who talked with Velma Foster. She came to the door with her dark hair mussed into a hundred curls around her shoulders, and her trim figure camouflaged in a drab woolen robe that must

have belonged to her father. She had a questioning look in her wide brown eyes. The expression heightened her lively beauty, and Dave was saddened by the necessity of hurting her.

He was still fumbling with a greeting when Velma saw the horse in the yard with Farley Foster's body roped to the saddle. A frightened sob shook her, and she clutched Dave's arm, almost collapsing against him. Dave held her close to him, trying to comfort her while the foreman stood behind him, worrying his hatbrim through his fingers. Afterward, Dave sent Velma back into the house while he and the foreman carried the rancher's body to the leather couch in the parlor.

"The albino wolf," the foreman murmured when they returned to the porch. "I've heard they're a heap of bad luck, and that one sure was."

Dave sent the foreman back to the bunkhouse without any comment on the man's superstition. He found Velma seated in the dark parlor, her face buried in her hands. He did not speak to her until she had overcome the first shock of truth. Then he told her of his suspicions, and was surprised to see the fresh concern come into her face.

"Please, Dave," she said, grasping his hand anxiously. "don't get yourself into trouble. Father's dead, and it won't help any for you to die, too. I—I can't lose you both. Let it be an accident if they want to call it that."

Dave shook his head. "I can't do it, Velma. You can't let a man get by with a thing like this. One day he might decide it would be a good way to get rid of me, too—or even you. I've made my play now, and I've got to follow it."

Velma folded her hands hopelessly in her lap. The smallness and aloneness of her made Dave want to stay with her instead of riding on the wild gamble he had planned. He tried to explain to Velma that it was a task he felt as a responsibility, one he could not risk with Sheriff Frank Dot-

son. Dotson was honest, but he had been elected by cattlemen. He would want to wait and weigh the information he could get from them. The best time to catch Farley Foster's killer was tonight.

"But it's a dead man's trap, Dave," Velma pleaded. "You can't make a challenge like that and live. If the killer thinks you know him, he won't rest until you're where you can't talk."

Dave hid behind a reassuring smile the tension which had been twanging his nerves since he had made the accusation at the wolf hunters' camp. Velma was right, but Dave had made himself the target of a killer's gun purposefully. When someone came gunning for him, that would be all the proof he needed that Farley Foster's death was no accident.

Dave was on his way out when Velma followed him and asked a favor. "I'd like you to get father's money belt for me, Dave. He'd just sold some cattle in town when Tom Simmons asked him to hunt the albino. The bank was closed, and he didn't trust the money in the safe."

She waited in the doorway while Dave returned to the parlor. Before he ran his hands along the waist of Farley Foster's levis a grim conviction had already settled in Dave's mind. Velma read the worry in his eyes when he came back through the hallway. Dave knew now why Foster had been killed.

"It's gone," Dave said. "How much did he have on him?"

"He sold a hundred head to the army quartermaster. They must have brought between four and five thousand. The deal is always handled through a broker, and father collects in cash."

Dave said, "Not much to kill a man for, but enough if you've never had that kind of money. I'll get it back for you, Velma."

DAVE TANNER rode a wide circle around his cabin on Blackstone Mesa. There was one place you always could be

sure you could kill a man. Sooner or later anyone who ran his own place had to come home.

Daylight was two hours away when Dave found the horse hidden in a patch of scrub cedars a hundred yards behind his lambing pens. So far Dave Tanner had outguessed the man.

It was logical. Hide your horse and then sneak up afoot. Get into the house while you know it's unoccupied, and wait. The sheriff would be hard to find at midnight, and if a man had business with the law it could wait until daylight. But Dave wouldn't be alive at daylight if the killer's strategy worked. A silhouette in a doorway was an easy target for a gunman hiding in a dark room.

The killer was in the cabin now, but Dave's planning had not gone beyond making sure of this fact. He sat for a while considering the tired horse standing in the brush with its reins dragging the dirt. There was no way of knowing how long the animal had been here. It carried no brand, but there would be several people who could identify it. Riding stock was usually associated closely with owners in this country, and certain mounts automatically identified the men who rode them. Dave had no particular curiosity about his observations. He knew who owned the horse. But his rambling thoughts led him eventually to a solution, and he retraced part of his trail.

Leading his horse, Dave entered a dry wash from the south and followed its eroded course until he reached a point fifty yards from his cabin. He had selected a spot where he could watch both the front and rear of the building. Dave took his rifle from the saddle boot, glanced speculatively at the sky, and lay down in the wash to wait. The killer couldn't wait much longer. It would be daylight soon, and his position would be risky. He might be seen leaving the cabin, or someone might discover his horse.

The man pulled out sooner than Dave had expected. False dawn had sent the first cobweb-like streaks of rose and yellow into the eastern horizon, and Dave was fighting an urge to go to sleep where he lay on his belly in the rocky dirt with his eyes at the rim of the wash. He had been that way for more than an hour, tense and alert at first, and then weary, doubting. But the first movement sent a quiver of excitement through him, and Dave squinted his eyes through the gloom to make sure his imagination had not tricked him into seeing something that wasn't there.

Something had moved, all right. Dave saw it again now, a stealthy, hesitant shadow at the rear of the cabin. The man stopped there a moment, probably swinging his eyes over the open ground between him and his hidden horse, and then he strode confidently away. Dave waited until the man was too far advanced to gain the safety of the cabin again, and then he climbed out of the gully. He broke into a run, moving on his toes. Desperation drove Dave to a speed beyond his usual capacity, and he had closed the distance to twenty yards before the killer heard the rustle of grass under booted feet. The man looked over his shoulder suddenly, and Dave was close enough to see the startled fear leap into his face.

"Hold it right there, Bolling!" Dave shouted. He jarred to a halt, whipping the rifle to his shoulder.

Dave stopped just in time. Herb Bolling obeyed the sheepman's command, but as he turned he brought a sixgun in sight with him. Dave squeezed the trigger, and was uncertain for a moment whether or not the rifle had fired. All he heard was the explosion of Bolling's sixgun. A sliver of flame leaped out at him, reflecting against the sweat-slick round face of the rancher. Then Herb Bolling sat down hard in the dirt, clutching his ribs and moaning for breath. Bolling's shot had come just a trifle late.

THE sun was up hot and bright by the time Dave got Herb Bolling into town and had told Sheriff Frank Dotson his story. The bullet had torn a ragged gash along Bolling's right side, but the sheriff took a look at the wound and decided a long rest in jail would do it good.

Dotson had just locked Herb Bolling in a cell, when a group of riders stopped outside. Velma Foster pushed the door open and looked about her anxiously. She saw Dave Tanner, and leaned against the wall as if she were out of breath. Dave started to go to her, but Tom Simmons and the other wolf hunters entered at that moment, and he waited.

After paying their respects to Velma Foster at the Circle Star, the men had ridden into town to tell their version of her father's death. Upset by Dave's accusations, they had called off the wolf hunt shortly after he left, and had assumed Bolling went home like the rest of them. Velma had decided to accompany the men to the sheriff's office for another reason—to warn Dotson that Dave Tanner might be in danger.

Dotson fingered the sheaf of bills Dave had taken from Bolling, shaking his head despairingly. "Sometimes a man takes another's charity until he gets to hate him. I reckon every time Bolling saw Farley Foster it reminded him of his own failure. He knew Foster had this money on him, so why take crumbs when you can have a whole cake for a change?"

"Maybe it figgers," Tom Simmons said grudgingly, "but it beats me how that sheep-er bluffed Bolling into believing he knew who the killer was."

Dotson chuckled drily. "He wasn't bluffing, Tom. The way Tanner tells me, he knew it was Bolling all the time. You told Tanner you didn't know what you shot at out there, and he believed you. Shadroe said he threw down on a coyote, and that sounded reasonable. But a killer always likes a good alibi, and Bolling made his too good. He said he shot at the albino wolf."

Tom Simmons grunted. "So what? That's what we was there for."

The sheriff turned his grizzled face toward Dave Tanner, allowing him the moment of triumph which might raise the cattlemen's estimate of him.

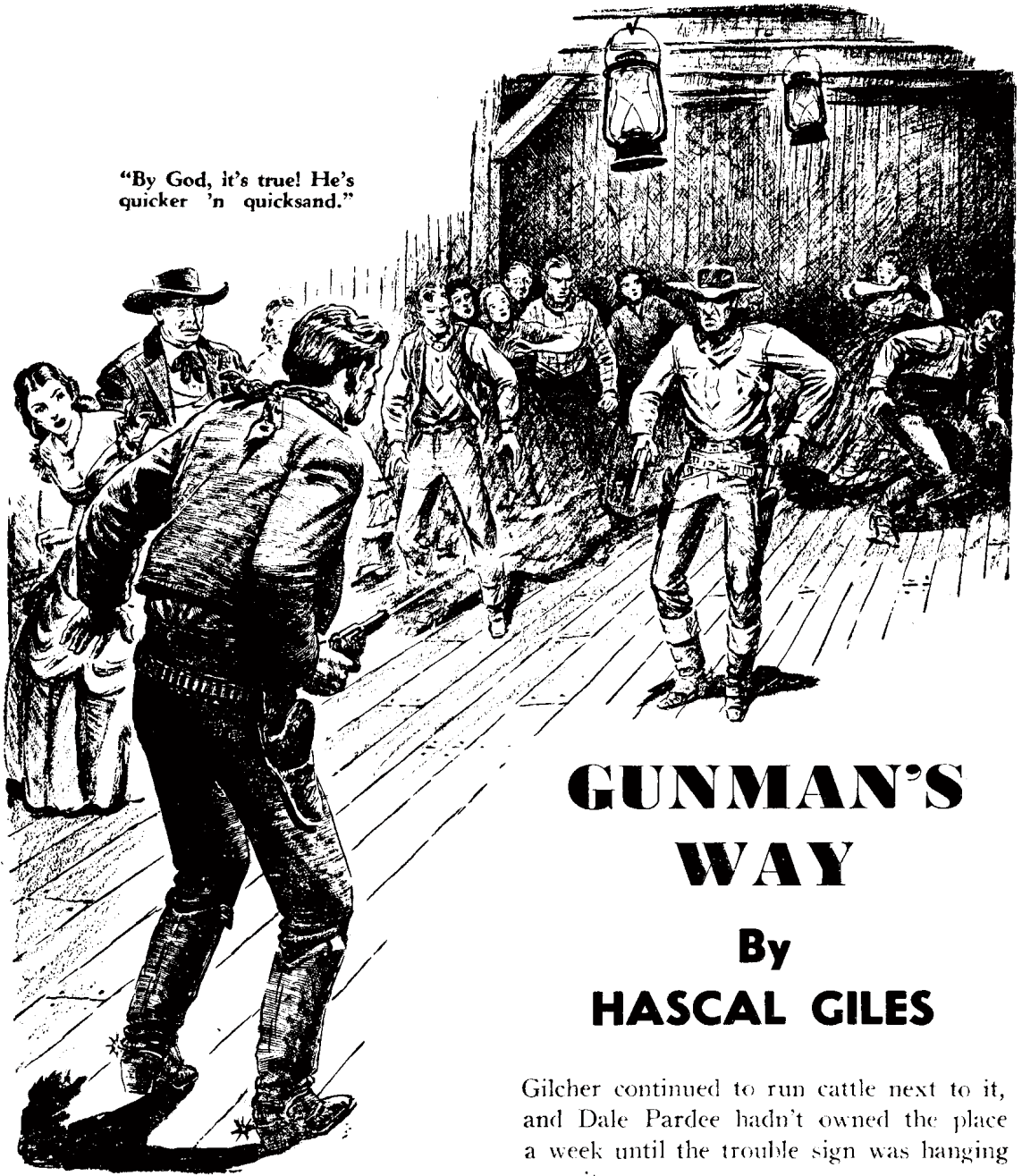
"When you didn't invite me to help, I was disappointed," Dave said quietly, "so I went hunting myself. I killed the albino yesterday about sunset. That's what I rode out to tell Farley Foster."

Tom Simmons looked steadily at the sheepman for a few seconds, and there was less animosity in his bruised face. He glanced toward the cells at the rear of the jail, and then headed for the door, satisfied.

Over his shoulder, he said: "Too bad they don't pay a bounty on all wolves, Dave. They ought to pay double on the two-legged kind."

Dave Tanner followed Simmons into the street. Velma Foster walked with him, and the warmth of her hand on his arm soothed the tiredness that was all through him. No bounty could buy the things he had found today. Velma Foster was at his side, and Tom Simmons had called him by name, addressing him as an equal. A sheepman on this range couldn't ask more. ● ● ●

"By God, it's true! He's quicker 'n quicksand."



Bullets were Ed Gilcher's business and he reaped his bloody profits alone—until he gambled his profits and his life on the guns of a faster man!

EVERYBODY ON the Singletree range said there'd never be any man big enough to hold down the piece of graze along Kildeer Creek as long as Ed

GUNMAN'S WAY

By
HASCAL GILES

Gilcher continued to run cattle next to it, and Dale Pardee hadn't owned the place a week until the trouble sign was hanging over it.

Pardee, a quiet, unobtrusive man in his mid-twenties, had come in one day about dusk, and nobody had paid him much attention while he bought supplies at Jim Burke's General Store. But when he showed up on Saturday night for the weekly dance at Stacy's barn, folks began to realize he wasn't just another stranger passing through.

Appropriately, it was Ed Gilcher who

was the first to learn what Pardee was doing in Singletree. At the same time, Ed began to suspect what had brought the man to the quiet little Panhandle cowtown. The dance at Stacy's barn seldom got started until Ed Gilcher arrived, and this wasn't altogether out of respect to Ed, even though he was Singletree's most influential citizen. But the rancher usually escorted his daughter to the dance, and nobody risked selecting a partner until he'd exhausted his chances with Marie Gilcher.

While the fiddles were warming up inside and the women were fussing around a table piled high with sandwiches, most of the cowhands and town loafers were lounging around outside the doorway smoking and passing an occasional bottle of whiskey. Dale Pardee stood among them, yet apart from them, talking little while he ran his sky-blue eyes frequently down the dusty street toward the open range.

Soon somebody said, "Here comes Gilcher's rig now." Pardee threw down his cigarette and ran his thumbs along his sagging gunbelt as though he were trying to steady a quivering stomach.

Talk died among the cowhands as Gilcher halted his prancing blacks in front of the barn, handed the reins to a waiting hostler, and then reached up a thick hand for the slende blonde girl with him.

There was a rustle of crinoline and white silk as Marie Gilcher swung lightly to the ground. Her golden hair gleamed like a star which had suddenly fallen among them. The rancher waved the men aside, tucked Marie's arm beneath his own and prepared to make his grand entrance.

And then Marie Gilcher saw Dale Pardee. He had not moved out with the others. He had merely taken one step to the right so that the light from the lanterns inside could strike his face. A deep-throated gasp of wonder and surprise came from Marie, and suddenly she had pulled away from her father's arm, leaving him standing open-mouthed.

After reaching him, she seemed at a loss for words and somewhat embarrassed by her impulsiveness. She grasped Pardee's hand silently and smiled into his face.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, ma'am. I took your advice and I—"

Pardee's words broke off as Ed Gilcher loomed before him. Gilcher eased Marie toward him and waited for an explanation.

For a moment Marie's wide gray eyes expressed her doubts. Then she said, "Father, this is Dale Pardee. I met him last summer while I was visiting Aunt Martha in El Paso."

Gilcher's face turned the color of scorched leather, as he moved in front of his daughter.

"You're not Pardee the gunny, are you mister?" His usual booming voice was a threatening whisper.

Pardee's black brush jacket swelled with his sharp intake of breath and he tugged irritably at the wide brim of his black hat.

"Not a gunny, Gilcher. A trouble-shooter for the Southern Pacific and a guard on some gold shipments where I had to shoot fast to keep the vultures from picking the bones of honest, hard-working folks I respect."

"Put any brand you want on it," Gilcher sapped, "and you still ain't the kind of man I want my daughter sashaying around with."

"After I met Marie I didn't want to be that kind any more either," Pardee added mildly. "I hired out my gun because it got me a hundred a month. Punching cows used to get me forty. I never could have saved enough money to buy my own place that way."

A scornful grin broke through Ed Gilcher's tight mouth. "So now you're a cowman?"

Pardee nodded. "I bought the old Double O place on Kildeer Creek."

Telling Ed Gilcher this was like belting him in the belly when he wasn't looking. He raised a knotted fist toward Dale Par-

dee, held it quivering there a moment, and then gazed at his daughter, suspecting her of conspiracy.

"You go on inside, honey," Gilcher said. Marie quickly obeyed the polite order. Pardee's steady glance did not erase the fear from her face as she entered the barn.

AFTER HIS daughter had left, Gilcher's steely eyes swung once around the circle of cowhands who were beginning to sense the tension between the two men at the door. The onlookers drifted inside as abruptly as if Gilcher had herded them with a whip.

Gilcher fastened his eyes on Pardee's face. "Most likely Marie told you a youngster with a lot of guts and gall could pick up the Double O for a song and make a go of it. Last two years since her Ma passed on it seems she gets a lot of amusement out of tormenting me. But she ought to have told you to ask Jeff Lansing a few questions before you took a deed to it. Lansing just pulled out and left the place a couple years back."

"Lansing didn't need to tell me much," said Pardee, with a newly acquired hardness in his voice. "His shoulder's still stiff from the slug you put in it. Maybe you can swell your chest out a little bigger when you know his nerve is gone and he's satisfied to run a saddle shop in El Paso. He told me the two gents who owned the place before him are still carrying the scars of your lead. I've heard that the sheriff doesn't even ask questions in cases like that because you can change sheriffs just by saying you don't like him. You're a big man, Gilcher."

The sting of Pardee's sarcasm caused Gilcher to lower his head briefly, but as he looked up he appeared to have a grip on his anger. Yet he said, stubbornly, "The last three men on the Double O didn't last a week, Pardee. You'd better think that over."

"Why, Gilcher? What makes you think

you've got to boss graze that don't belong to you?"

Gilcher's eyes narrowed. "You'll hear I'm piggish, Pardee. I'm not. It's the others. My Anchor graze ends fifty feet short of Kildeer Creek. Three men at Double O have built fences on my side of the creek. They said they were afraid I'd crowd my cattle onto their range and take it over. I've torn that fence down three times and there's always been some lead-slinging afterwards. But I can't graze my cattle on one side of my range and have them walk ten miles across to the next water hole. I'm not a killer, Pardee. But I believe there's some things that have to be shared by neighbors in a big country."

A dry chuckle came from Dale Pardee's lips. With his head turned toward the door, he sneered, "You never shared anything with anybody, Gilcher."

"No," Gilcher admitted guiltily. "I reckon I haven't. But nobody ever let me do a favor. Everybody's afraid I'm trying to take something away from him, so little folks walk around me with their hackles up."

Pardee shot the man a level gaze. "I'm not afraid of you, Gilcher."

"You ought to be," Gilcher said. The muscles of his thick neck corded as the anger in him renewed. "You've got more reason than anybody. When you start to string up the wire my men have cut off that fence along the creek you'll—"

"I can't do that, Gilcher," Pardee cut in quietly. "One of the first things I did when I moved into the shack up there a few days ago was pull down the poles." He ran his hand along the worn butt of his six-gun for the first time since Gilcher's arrival. "I don't need a fence to keep Anchor cows off my spread, Gilcher. I'm leaving that job up to you."

THE SCRAPE of the fiddles and the thump of dancing feet were loud in the stillness which surrounded Pardee's words.

For several seconds Gilcher's eyes bored into Pardee's face. His glance shifted to the wooden handle of the gun which had made Pardee a legend along the border. Then the hard lines of Ed Gilcher's face relaxed and a strange unreadable smile softened his mouth.

Finally, he said, "How well do you know my daughter, Pardee?"

"I saw her several times when she was visiting her aunt. She didn't tell me everything about the Double O, but it didn't matter. Nothing could have kept me away from Singletree, Gilcher, and nothing can make me leave."

Ed Gilcher pursed his lips and rocked on his toes a few times. He toyed with the diamond stickpin in his tie. "You must have piled up a sizeable bankroll then."

Pardee shook his head. "Just enough to buy the Double O. When I paid off Jeff Lansing it cleaned me out."

"Then how do you figure to build a cattle spread. Marie's seen too much success to hang on to a failure."

"I'll take odd jobs," Pardee said firmly. "I'll break horses, fork hay at the livery or swamp for saloon. I'll buy a cow when I can, Gilcher, but I'll build me a ranch here."

"I'm thinking you might do all you say you will," he grunted, almost to himself. "Yessir, I believe you'd give it an honest try."

Seeing the change in the man, Dale Pardee chewed thoughtfully on the corner of his lower lip. He started to walk away, hesitating as Ed Gilcher continued to nod his head gravely.

"What does all that mean, Gilcher?" Pardee asked suspiciously.

"It means," Gilcher said slowly, "that I'll be seeing you in the morning about day-break."

Before Pardee could question him further, Gilcher strode past him into the barn. Pardee followed him, his deep-tanned face going pale as he studied Gilcher's retreat-

ing back. He felt the soft touch of a hand on his arm and turned to find Marie smiling at him. He rubbed his forefinger playfully over the worry lines that blemished her wide forehead and returned her smile.

"Your old man and I understand each other now," he said, feasting on the quick joy his words brought to her eyes. But as he slipped his arms about her and took up the step of the Chicken Reel, he found Ed Gilcher's eyes following him. Pardee wished he could believe his own lie.

As the dance went on, he did not talk with Marie as much as he would have liked. Couples stopped them frequently to make introductions. The cowboys who had waited outside had heard enough to start everyone buzzing, and before the evening was over Pardee was the object of many glances. They knew about Dale Pardee. They'd heard talk of him from grubline riders and passing drummers. They wanted to be able to say they'd shaken his hand and got a close look at his black-butted gun. The coldness with which Pardee greeted such attention did not discourage them. At last he pulled Marie toward a side door.

"Let's get outside," he said uncomfortably. "I want to see if I'm still an ordinary two-legged man."

Marie squeezed his hand in hers and said teasingly, "I thought you'd never find an excuse, Dale."

"You mean you're as sick of this as I am?"

"I mean it's been a long time since you've kissed me," she whispered softly, and Pardee's face reddened as he lengthened his stride.

Pardee's haste was in vain. He'd just started to step through the open doorway, welcoming the coolness of the night air against his face, when a tight, commanding voice lashed out with an order. "Pull up there, Pardee, and let's talk over an old score."

Pardee dropped Marie's arm and turned swiftly. "I'm Pete Decker, up from the Pecos," the man said, and braced his legs and waited as though the whole matter were explained.

Decker was tall and thin-limbed. His ragged levis had turned a motley gray from the caliche dust picked up in miles of travel. His hands were bony and long-fingered. They twitched nervously while they hovered above the outthrust butts of two ivory-handled Colt .45s. Around him the dancers were as still as desert dunes. A shadow-laced aisle opened between him and Pardee.

"I don't know you, Decker," Pardee said evenly. "I've got no quarrel with you. Why don't you help yourself to some grub and join the shindig?"

Decker's lips pulled back to allow a bleak smile to break through the dark stubble on his hawk face.

"They know you along the Pecos, bucko. Before I was sent up to the pen in Seventy-nine I was knowed as the fastest thing on the river. When I busted out a while back some told me you was faster. I didn't believe them so I come to find out." Decker paused, flexing his poised hands. "I'm ready when you are, Pardee."

Pardee shook his head slowly from side to side, as though to shake the picture from his mind. His glance touched Marie's bewildered face and she took a step toward him, asking, "What is it, Dale? What does he want?"

"Nothing," Pardee said sharply. "Walk on outside, Marie, and wait for me."

"If you'll tell me why he's here."

"He wants to kill me," Pardee said savagely. "Now do what I tell you, Marie."

"But why, Dale? What have you done to him? What's—"

There was a stir in the crowd, and Pardee saw Ed Gilcher's hulking form out of the corner of his eye. He heard the rancher's gruff voice explaining, "Because Pardee's a gunman, honey. There'll always

be men hunting him, jealous men who want the name Pardee's got. The only way Pardee can get rid of them is to let one of them kill him, and then it'll start all over again with the killer."

"But—but that's so cruel! Dale doesn't want to—"

PETE DECKER'S nerves couldn't stand any more. The movement caused by Gilcher's interruption had made him jump, but he knew if he turned his head he'd lose an advantage. He screamed, "Grab it!" and Pardee almost welcomed the moment.

As Pete Decker yelled, his bony hands plunged toward his oiled holsters. Nobody knew when Pardee first moved, but it was some time after Decker got his own guns free. A single shot echoed through the high loft of the barn and Pete Decker's dead hands could not lift the guns he'd drawn. Decker spun half-around, twisting his legs grotesquely, and then fell heavily on the planked floor.

For a long time no one moved or spoke. A man finally said in an awed whisper, "By God, what I read in the papers wasn't no lie. Pardee's quicker'n quicksand."

Pardee looked hesitantly at Ed Gilcher and said lamely, "I saw a reward dodger on Decker a while back. He shot a guard in the back when he broke out of Huntsville, and he had a lot of notches on his guns before that."

The disapproval on Gilcher's face was as plain as a brand, and he pretended not to hear Pardee's words. But Marie heard them, and she sensed the agony which had caused them to be spoken. She pulled away from her father and ran into Dale Pardee's arms. Her words were so loud it seemed she wanted everyone to hear her. "I love you so much, Dale! I love you even more because everyone else is afraid."

Ed Gilcher came up to them slowly and

gently put his hand on Marie's shoulder. He looked like a man who had lost an exhausting struggle.

"We'd better get back to Anchor now, honey." He took Marie's arm and looked at Pardee from expressionless eyes. "I'll see you in the morning," he said.

Dale Pardee shot Ed Gilcher the next day shortly after sunup, and it was a long time before anyone got the straight of what happened.

It was mid-morning when Pardee came into Singletree with his big sorrel gelding carrying double. He sat far back on the cantle, his lean face lumpy and worried. Ed Gilcher was seated in front of him with most of his weight braced against Pardee's chest. The rancher's face was pale and drawn. He had a blood-stained neckerchief wrapped around his right arm-pit.

Pardee pulled to a halt in front of Doc Kelton's office and helped Gilcher to the ground. When they came outside twenty minutes later they conducted themselves like strangers. Gilcher's shirt was buttoned over his right arm, but a wad of white bandage was visible around the collar. He stepped onto the boardwalk and turned left toward the livery stable, ignoring Pardee.

But Sheriff Nate Butterworth had seen them arrive and he was waiting for them. He rose from the shade of the hotel awning next door and blocked Gilcher's path.

"Looks like there's been some sort of difficulty, Ed," he said politely. "Maybe you ought to tell me about it."

Gilcher shook his head and started to move on, but Pardee provided the answer. He turned away from his horse and met the gangling sheriff's curious stare. "I shot him," he admitted.

"It's none of your affair, Nate," Gilcher said gruffly. "I'll handle it."

Nate Butterworth hooked his thumbs in his leather galluses and squinted his faded eyes at Pardee. "I saw what happened at Stacy's barn and didn't need to ask ques-

tions. But I don't like this, Pardee. You've admitted shooting Ed and you'll need some good reasons to keep me from locking you up."

Pardee gave Gilcher a long look, his manner somewhat apologetic, but the rancher turned his face away to stare stonily at the hotel door.

"I was told from the beginning Gilcher would make trouble for me," Pardee began slowly, "and when he promised to pay me a visit at daybreak I was up on the ridge watching for him. At sunrise I heard cattle moving toward the creek, and then they busted out into the open and headed my way. Gilcher was alone. The cows were wearing Double O brands—my brand—and Gilcher started hazing them onto my land. You see how it looked to me."



The sheriff nodded. He frowned over his shoulder at Gilcher, and then faced Pardee again. "A man would likely think Gilcher was trying to frame you with a rustling charge. That what you figured?"

Pardee shifted uncomfortably. He ran his thumbs along his shell belt and stared at the ground. "I called out to Gilcher,

I told him I didn't want them cows on my land. I told him if he pushed them across the creek I'd put a slug in his shoulder. He just laughed and kept coming, so I shot him."

"What about it, Ed?" Butterworth asked. "You want to lay up some charges against Pardee? You ain't told your side of this."

Gilcher swung his head around and aimed his words. "I told you I'd handle it, Nate. Only way I ever knew to pay off lead was with more of the same. Pardee won't get off." He strode away angrily.

AS THE rancher disappeared around the corner, Butterworth stepped down and laid a hand on Pardee's shoulder. "You've done Ed a big favor, Pardee. He knows you're in love with Marie and he don't want her to die with a broken heart when some fast gun finally takes your rep away. He'd rather see you dead now while it won't make her a widow. Ed's no slouch with a gun himself, and he'll be calling on you again."

"He'll be doing me a favor," Pardee said tonelessly and swung aboard the sorrel. He rode down the street without a backward glance. Nate Butterworth watched him out of sight, knowing something was amiss and not knowing what it was.

Ed Gilcher was a man of his word. His shoulder mended quickly, and in three weeks he sent for Pardee.

Pardee was in Singletree at the time. He'd spent a week grubbing mesquite out of his lower pasture, and then he'd come to town in search of work which would help him store up enough cash to buy cattle. The livery stable had a band of thirty wild mustangs which had to be gentled for the army, and after the contractor had seen a free sample of his work in the saddle, Pardee got the job at five dollars a head.

Pardee relaxed on the bench in front of the blacksmith shop each evening before

he bedded down in the livery's loft. He could watch the trail to Gilcher's Anchor Ranch from there, and he did not try to conceal his hope that Marie would ride in for a visit with him. When she didn't come, he knew Gilcher either had forbidden her to leave the ranch or she was too angry and hurt over the wounding of her father to care for Pardee any more. Pardee had to know which reason had kept her away, and on the day he finished breaking the horses he planned to ride to Anchor for the answer.

Marie was waiting beside his horse, however, when he stepped outside with his blanket roll on his shoulder and the army contractor's crisp new bills still wadded in his hand. The sun was dying on the horizon behind her, and the fiery sky made her look like she'd walked right out of heaven.

Pardee called to her, but his quick grin faded as soon as he was near enough to see the tears in her eyes.

Marie clutched him to her and Pardee had to hold her very close to understand the words which tumbled from her lips between sobs. But, when at last he understood her—understood that Ed Gilcher was waiting in the street to avenge the wound Pardee had inflicted upon him—he left her quickly. But Marie pursued him and Pardee had to force her arms loose so he could continue.

Behind him, the girl sobbed brokenly and said, "I tried to make him stay home, Dale, but he wouldn't listen. But at least I persuaded him to let me see you instead of sending one of the ranch hands for you. I'll wait here until—until you or father comes for me—and then I'll wait and wait—all my life for the other one."

Pardee went on down the street with the girl's sobs echoing in his ears. He turned the corner at the blacksmith shop. Seventy yards ahead of him a big, defiant shadow stood alone in the street. It was Ed Gilcher.

They had their shoot-out there in the quiet twilight with a score of faces peeping at them from around windows, rain barrels and porch posts. And when it was over Dale Pardee was lying stretched out in the caliche dust, the wind knocked out of him and one of Ed Gilcher's slugs burning in his shoulder.

Dimly, Pardee was aware of Ed Gilcher towering above him. The rancher's broad face was as white as paper and his eyes were wide with shock. Gilcher reached down to get his arms under Pardee's back, but Pardee elbowed him away.

"I can stand," he said weakly. He got his feet under him and struggled erect. The buildings started whirling and the street rocked at a sickening angle. He started falling, but Ed Gilcher's meaty shoulder caught him and he was vaguely aware of being lifted and carried away.

HE WOKE a half hour later in Doc Kelton's office, somewhat chagrined because the bullet shock had knocked him out. He was lying on the same cot where Ed Gilcher had rested three weeks ago when the doctor had dressed the rancher's wound. Marie was kneeling beside the cot, her troubled eyes waiting to meet his.

When she saw him looking at her, Marie's breast rose in a relieved sigh and she ran her hand tenderly through his hair.

"Why did you do it, Dale?" she asked tremulously. "Why did you just stand there and let father pull a gun and shoot you? Everyone in town says you didn't even try to draw your gun."

"And that ain't all they're saying," Ed Gilcher boomed, shoving tiny Doc Kelton aside and striding across the room. "You

know what the talk in the saloons is right now, Pardee? They're saying you've got a yellow streak wide as a barn door up your back and that I'm a better man forty ways from Sunday. They're saying just the sight of me cutting down on you scared you so bad you couldn't even grab for your gun. I don't like it, Pardee. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth. If you ain't able to get on your feet and tell them why you did it, I aim to tell them myself."

Pardee, wincing at the pain in his shoulders, shoved up on his elbow. "You're not telling them anything, Gilcher. Take a man like Pete Decker, now. Why would he want to risk his neck just to shoot it out with an old yellow dog like me? It wouldn't help his rep a bit after this."

Ed Gilcher stopped his restless pacing and stared at the floor a moment. When he looked up again he seemed more at ease with his conscience. "Well, when you look at it that way I reckon you owed me the satisfaction of putting that slug in you."

Marie jumped to her feet, her eyes blazing indignantly. "He owed you nothing, father. Everyone knows you were trying to frame Dale so—"

"You've got your old man all wrong, Marie," Pardee cut in sheepishly. "Just as far wrong as I had him, maybe. My trigger finger was too eager when I put that slug in Gilcher. It wasn't until I brought him into town that I found out he was willing to help me get a start in return for the water I was letting him share. He was giving me the ten cows he was pushing across the creek with my brand on them. He thought I was arguing with him because I was too damn' proud to take them!"



*He hunted around till
he found the shingle*

Time for Violence

By HASCAL GILES

They were waiting for a chance to kill the squatter

CARDWELL had wanted to kill the squatter when the man first moved into the valley, but he'd talked to Con Ainsworth about it, and Ainsworth had said to wait. The country was filling up with people more all the time, Ainsworth had said, and a man didn't have the freedom he used to have.

There was a deputy marshal in Sherman now, eighty miles away, and that was what Ainsworth had in mind. The law was moving in, a step at a time, and Ainsworth was getting cautious.

Now, as Cardwell waited in Orb Preston's cross-trails store for Ainsworth to

come in with his usual Saturday night grub list, he was ready to force the matter to a decision. Once a man had his family around him he was twice as hard to handle; it made him think he had roots and rights, and put a hard pride in him to have his wife watching. Ainsworth was overrated, in fact Cardwell began to wonder how the man had ever managed to set himself up as the valley's spokesman. He had muffed this deal by his caution, and Cardwell saw no way to settle it now without violence.

"He sent for his woman, huh?" Cardwell said. He had his elbows propped against a stack of crisp levis, staring absently out into the lavender twilight which had fallen over the clearing since he had come. He didn't get an answer right away, and he turned with annoyance in his muddy eyes, walking closer to the counter where Orb Preston stood with his bony face close to the dog-eared Bible he was forever reading.

PRESTON turned a page without looking up. There was an ugly twist about Cardwell's small mouth tonight, and his loose-skinned face was all bunched up like sand mounds left behind a desert storm. When evil which he could not touch was brooding under his roof, Orb Preston felt a man ought at least to hunt some answers for his own soul.

"Who do you mean? Oh, Ben Inskip, I reckon."

"The squatter up in Blackjack Flats," Cardwell said. "You know who I mean. You said he was here. When's his woman coming?"

"Inskip didn't say exactly. He said it had been too long without her, though, because he made her a promise. I was just making talk with you, Cardwell. I didn't mean to carry tales. All he said was he'd have his wife with him by the time his cabin was finished. But a man's got a lot to do when he starts with a thicket and tries to make it feed him. Maybe it'll be next spring—"

Cardwell stared out the window again. "It'll be a week," he said, almost to himself. "Maybe less."

He saw Ainsworth's buckboard bounce

over the pole bridge at the far edge of the clearing. A big man, Ainsworth, in every way. He sat in the center of the wagon seat, as though trying to cover it all, his hide vest flapping to show his barrel chest and thick waist. Ainsworth whipsawed the buckboard in at the front of the store, handling the team as he handled everything—with confidence and finality.

He had settled here when all the land was a thicket, and his voice was the first every new settler had heard. Those who had been allowed to stay—those who had chosen land far enough from Ainsworth's Circle A Ranch to show respect for his power—were still listening to that voice. But Ben Inskip had come too late.

Ainsworth gave Cardwell a nod as he came in. That was all—a faint dip of his big-brimmed black hat without any change in the bear-trap mouth or round blue eyes. His aloofness put a taste of vinegar in Cardwell's mouth as it always did. He had gone to him out of habit, but he regretted it now. Inskip was none of Ainsworth's business; the squatter was much closer to Cardwell's place, and Cardwell needed more room to grow than did Ainsworth. Ainsworth was too big already.

Cardwell waited until Ainsworth had reeled off his needs to Orb Preston. He watched disdainfully as Preston grew polite and fawning under the authority of the gruff voice, eagerly stuffing the items in Ainsworth's grass sack for him.

His business finished, Ainsworth put his back against the counter and faced Cardwell as though he had known why he was here.

"I was up to Blackjack Flats again today," Cardwell said, his eyes probing at Ainsworth's square face. "You'd be surprised what the squatter's got done. The thicket's most gone—there's good grass showing over maybe two hundred acres. Six months is a long time to dally over a thing. He's roofing his cabin, and things look real permanent. He's got a water hole grubbed out and seepage is pouring him more water than I ever knowed was there. He's got a good layout."

Ainsworth's eyes squinted to get the picture and his tight mouth smiled a little.

"That's what we want; ain't it? Nobody could run cattle in the brush that was there, and a man can't keep up with his chores and send his cowhands out to clear new land. That much work would cost a lot of dinero if a man had to hire it done hisself."

"His woman's coming," Cardwell said. "You can't scare a man off a place so easy once he starts calling it home."

Ainsworth nodded. "I know. He's got stockers coming in from Sherman, too. It's a shame about a man with Inskip's grit. But if he stayed there'd be others, and the first thing you know fellers like us could spit clean across our range. But thirty head of breed stuff must have taken the last of the stake Inskip come here with. When you can't scare a man, you've got to break his spirit, Cardwell."

"We've got a week," Cardwell said, trying to keep it from sounding like an ultimatum. Ainsworth had tried to impress him again with his far-reaching grip. He'd had his cowboys snooping and reporting to him, and he knew more of the squatter's progress than did Cardwell. But still he'd let Cardwell talk first, like a gambler who runs up the stakes before he claims a pot.

THERE was no sign that Cardwell's impatient tone bothered Ainsworth. His mind seemed to be on other things. He remembered something he'd forgotten, and he looked over his shoulder at Orb Preston.

"Throw in sixteen sacks of smoking tobacco and a box of strychnine, Orb."

He watched the storekeeper complete the order, nodding approval as Orb Preston wrapped a double thickness of paper around the strychnine before he put it in the sack with the feed.

"Strychnine's moving slow as soap." The storekeeper wanted to make conversation with a man as important as Ainsworth. "Wolves ain't as thick as they once was, and some like a rifle better than poison."

Cardwell's patience was running thin. He grabbed at his own grass sack which he had filled an hour earlier. He slung it over his shoulder and pushed his sharp chin out at Ainsworth. "That roof will be on Inskip's cabin in a week. That's not much

time, Ainsworth."

"I'll handle it," Con Ainsworth said, his lips settling hard behind the words. "Let's move over to Orb's bar and drink on that."

"Some other time," Cardwell said. "I've been here too long."

Cardwell waited three days, and nothing happened. He hid in the brush on the fourth day and watched Ben Inskip at his chores, and that was when he decided he'd wait no longer. The squatter was a tall, gangling man whose shoulders were already rounded from six months of swinging axe and scythe. His flannel shirt was a mess of crude patches, and his sandy hair was faded almost white from too much sun. Most of the things he had done here were a matter of necessity if a man was to carve a future from the brush, but now he was overstepping the bounds of reason. As Cardwell watched, Ben Inskip put the finishing touches on a pole fence around the water hole he had sunk at the edge of the flats.

Where the two patches came to a point between Inskip's sharp shoulder blades would be a good place to put the bullet, Cardwell thought as he backed toward his horse.

He went to the Circle A to tell Ainsworth what had happened, but before he got there he hated himself for it. He knew why Ainsworth was hogging this show, but still he was running to him. Ainsworth didn't aim to let Cardwell use a foot of Inskip's graze. If Ainsworth ran Inskip off he'd have first claim to what the man left behind him.

It was dusk when Cardwell stopped in the cedar clump a hundred yards from the Circle A ranch house. As he pulled his claybank to a halt, his mind was already made up; but the way it happened seemed almost like impulse. Ainsworth just happened to step into the yard at that moment, shading his eyes toward the horizon as if looking for his riders to come in, and Cardwell was watching him across the sight of his rifle. A puff of dust jumped from Ainsworth's hide jacket before he spun around like a boulder teetering off a cliff and fell on his back.

WHEN he went back to the Flats that night Cardwell took Mark Stucky, one

of his riders, with him. A man could go after a squatter without keeping secrets from his hired hands. The death of an invader like Ben Inskip didn't have to be a mystery for folks to guess about as it was in the case of Con Ainsworth.

"He's got a fence all right, boss," Mark Stucky said when they came out of the brush and started across the squatter's cleared pasture. The cowboy rubbed a hand across his scrubby mustache and spit between the ears of his horse. "Looks like he's aimin' to make sure there'll be no water used by nobody before he brings in his own stock."

Cardwell signalled for a halt, and the horses pranced up sideways to the skinned poles which Inskip had stacked around his water. Cardwell pointed to the far side of the water hole where a gate sagged on rope hinges.

"He'd keep the fence forever. He's even got a gate to let 'em in and out, and then he'll shut it behind them in case a starving man happens past. A thirsty man opening that gate would likely get shot. That's the kind he is, Mark."

Mark took the lass' rope off his saddle-horn and ran the coils through his fingers. He made a hitch around the horn with one end of it, eyed an upthrust pole.

"You ready to pull it down, boss?"

Cardwell's eyes ran across the sweep of dark land and settled on the patch of orange light which showed in the front window of the new cabin. The squatter would hear them and come out with a gun in his hand. It would be self-defense, for the part about the fence would not have to be told to anyone—not even to a deputy marshal who might ride this way some day.

"I'm ready," Cardwell said.

Unlike most of Inskip's work, the fence was a fairly flimsy affair. With two ropes on the key poles and two wiry cowhorses tugging on them, the fence collapsed like a toadstool. Cardwell was disappointed because the fence fell so gently there was hardly a sound except the blowing of the horses.

"What now?" Mark asked.

Cardwell studied the lighted window for a moment, his muddy eyes expressionless in the moonless dark. "We'll put cattle over

here tomorrow. That ought to bring things to a head."

They started away, but Cardwell was not satisfied. He stopped, studying the fence, then he stepped to the ground.

"You want a drink of this squatter's fenced water, Mark?"

Mark wiped his mouth, understanding Cardwell's sudden thirst, but not sharing it. "I'd take you up if you had a bottle of good rotgut, boss."

Cardwell knelt at the edge of the water hole, taking off his peaked hat to fan the surface of the water. He lay on his belly and drank for a long time, catching his breath and drinking again. He started to drink some more, as though he wanted to take it all away with him, but the water left a bad taste in his mouth and he decided he'd satisfied the inner urging which had made him do it.

They were going into the brush again when the pain hit him. It was sudden and sharp, and Cardwell jerked his legs in the stirrups because of the shock of it. Hunger pangs, he thought; a man with a killing behind him and one in front of him had little appetite, and he'd skipped supper.

He groaned with the second pain, and Mark Stucky swung a sharp glance at him. "What's wrong, boss?"

Cardwell's legs were beginning to get out of control now. His stomach was a load of hot coals, and when the fire went through him it went to his toes. He pulled at the horse's reins, wondering why he couldn't see the trail ahead any more. And then he knew.

He didn't try to talk. He got the horse turned around, and beat it on the head with his fists to make it gallop. He heard Mark Stucky alongside him, but he did not try to see him. His voice was a whimper, a shameful sound, but he had to make Mark understand.

His horse shied away from the shambles of fallen poles and that was how he knew they were back at the water hole. He tried to step out of saddle, but his legs buckled under him and sent him tumbling on his face. A piece of wood rammed him under the chin, and he could feel the warmth of blood

(Concluded on page 113)

TIME FOR VIOLENCE

(Concluded from page 54)

on his neck, but not the pain. His stomach wouldn't let him feel anything but the fire it held.

Mark Stucky was beside him, pulling at him, shouting questions in his ears.

"The gate, Mark," he ground out. "Get me over to the gate Inskip built. Hurry, Mark, hurry!"

Mark didn't move. He wanted to know what had turned Cardwell's face so granite gray and what was causing his lips to turn inside out like those of a snarling wolf. For the sake of speed, Cardwell made himself listen, made himself answer.

"Strychnine, Mark. Strychnine that wasn't for wolves after all. That was Ainsworth's way, but the squatter found out before he brought his cattle in. Ainsworth meant to poison Inskip's breed stock, break him before he started. I—I'm glad I killed him. You—you can tell them that if—"

Mark Stucky eased the dead man down and stood looking at him, shaking his head. He didn't need to go to the gate now, but he went because it had seemed important to Cardwell. When you thought about it calmly, you knew why a man like Ben Inskip would fence a water hole. The fence had come down easily because it had been meant to come down when the water cleared. But he went to the gate, and hunted around amid the timbers until he found the shingle with the burned letters on it. He moved his lips over the two words, "POISON WATER," and then threw the shingle down and walked slowly back toward his horse.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 07, 2010

Hascal Giles, RIP

As reported by
Curt Phillips on
the PulpMags
Yahoo Group:

*"Western writer
Herman Hascal
Giles died
Tuesday, Nov. 2,
2010, in a hospice
facility in Bristol,
Tennessee. He
was 88. Giles was
well known locally
as a former
newspaperman
and had been the
publisher of our
leading regional
newspaper - The
Bristol Herald
Courier - for 30
years beginning
about 1950, but
pulpfans will
remember him as Hascal Giles, the author of 5 novels and
several dozen western short stories for MASKED RIDER and other
western pulps."*



He also wrote several Steve Reese novels for RANGE RIDERS WESTERN and came out of retirement in the Eighties to write several stand-alone traditional Western novels that were published by Zebra.